

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the Study of Religion in Contemporary Society

Haifaa Jawad

Abstract

Seyyed Houssein Nasr is one of the main proponents of the traditional religious perspective, including the traditional Islamic point of view. His work is notable for many reasons, among them the following: its in-depth analysis of contemporary society's spiritual poverty; its profound treatment of Islamic matters,¹ particularly in the context of the debate between Islamic modernism vs. Islamic traditionalism; its solid understanding of western philosophical thought and culture; its ability to present a compelling, critical appraisal of the modern predicament, boldly stating that which is perceived to be the truth, irrespective of whether or not it is fashionable or palatable as regards current opinion; and, lastly, its view of religion's role in contemporary society. Having said that, however, given that Nasr's work has a "metaphysical" nature, his writings, with few exceptions, are said to be demanding in terms of language, style, and expression, as well as of knowledge of other religions and philosophies, that they assume on the part of the ordinary reader.

Introduction

Nasr's approach to the study of religion in contemporary society is worthwhile investigating for two reasons. First, it encompasses and accepts all

Haifaa Jawad is a senior lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, UK.

revealed religions and their sacred quality, an approach that contrasts with current approaches in religious studies. He believes that this approach

... has more in common with the essence of religion. It wants to give absolute value to anything that is sacred. Hence, it is able to create a sacred atmosphere in which the uniqueness as well as the diversity of all traditions can be acknowledged.²

Second, it addresses and deals with how Islam and Muslims can accommodate the existing reality of other religions, an approach that could lead, ultimately, to a peaceful religious world community. But first, it is important to look at Nasr's life, education, career, and achievements.

Family Background and Early Childhood

Nasr was born to a respectable family of scholars and physicians in Tehran, Iran, in 1933. His grandfather traced his descent from a family of seyyeds (descendants of Prophet Muhammad). One of his grandfather's ancestors, Mulla Majed Hossein, was a famous religious scholar in Najaf who was invited by the Persian ruler Nadir Shah to come to Persia in the eighteenth century. However, as he died on the way, his family eventually settled in Kashan. Nasr's grandfather, a celebrated court physician at the Qajar court, was given the title of *nasr al-atibba'* (victory of physicians) in recognition of his long service. This title is the source of the family name. His grandmother was related to the Barmakids, a famous Shi'ah family whose members served as viziers during the `Abbasid caliphate in the ninth century.³

Nasr's father, also a celebrated physician, had additional interests: philosophy, literature, and education. After leaving the formal practice of medicine in order to pursue his interest in the field of education, Nasr's father gradually became the head of Persia's educational system from the end of the Qajar dynasty to the Pahlavi era. He was involved in drafting the constitution and the first Parliament after the constitutional revolution in 1906, and was elected to Parliament as a representative for Tehran. When Persia officially became Iran, he was among the founders of its modern educational system, a rector of the Teachers' College, and dean of several faculties at the University of Tehran.

According to Nasr, his father was a prominent philosopher, especially in ethics, and the author of well-known works in Persian. Apart from Persian, he spoke Arabic and French, as well as some Latin and English. He

possessed a major library that contained not only classical Islamic books, but also the works of such western authors as Michel de Montaigne, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, François Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as Plato and Aristotle. Hence, his father was well-acquainted with both the Islamic tradition and the western philosophical and scientific traditions, as well as with other religions and traditions.

Thus, the atmosphere in which Nasr was brought up, “while being deeply Persian, was also open to both Western ideas and religions and intellectual ideas of other traditions.”⁴ He stresses: “Universalism in its most positive sense permeated the atmosphere in which I was nurtured without in any way weakening the foundations of traditional Persian culture in which I was brought up.”⁵ His mother, also from a respectable religious family, received her education in the only institution of intermediary and higher learning for women at that time, and was one of its first graduates. Among the first group of women to receive a modern education in Iran, she was known to have had a keen interest in the intellectual and religious aspects of life and to have participated in work that served women’s rights. In addition, she was well-versed in Persian and Arabic poetry.

Since Nasr was the eldest of two sons, great care was taken to secure his education. At an early age, his parents began to teach him Qur’anic verses, Persian poetry, and history, especially sacred history. By the time he was 3, he was already beginning to read and write. His father used to take him to gatherings of eminent people who would recite verses of Persian poetry and contemplate their philosophical and spiritual meanings. The ambience in which he grew up, therefore, exposed him at a tender age to philosophical, theological, and spiritual discourses.⁶ The effect of this early traditional education on his intellectual development is immense, as he explains:

A classical and Persian traditional education in my early years left an indelible mark upon my mind as stories from the Holy Qur’an and the poems of Sa’di and Hafiz became engraved upon the deepest layers of my soul during this period. At the same time, even these early years brought me face to face with the presence of another world view, that of the modern West, which appeared at that time at once enticing and threatening.⁷

Such childhood experiences apparently kept him in constant contact or union with his roots, namely, traditional Islam, which he set out to defend – and continues to do so until the present day.⁸

Education and Learning

Nasr's pattern of life and early education were interrupted suddenly by his father's illness. Out of concern for the welfare of young Nasr, who was very attached to his father, the family decided to send him to the United States so that he would not be near his father at the moment of his death. In 1945, at the age of 12½, he embarked on a long 3-month journey to his new home. Upon his arrival, he enrolled at the Peddie School in Hightstown, New Jersey, one of the best preparatory schools on the East Coast. He stayed there for 4½ years, graduating in 1950. His years at Peddie helped him to acquire a good knowledge of English, western culture, American history, science, and, most importantly, Christianity, especially Protestantism.⁹

At the age of 17, he became the first Iranian student to enroll at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he decided to pursue an undergraduate degree in physics. Although he soon began to doubt if physics could answer his quest for understanding "the nature of physical reality," since his interest lay in theoretical physics and mathematics rather than in experimental physics, he remained in the department until he graduated with honors in 1954. But by this time, his interest was no longer in physics; rather, he was interested in the humanities and philosophy.

While at MIT, his teacher Giorgio de Santillana exerted a great influence upon his education, especially in the field of Hinduism and modern western thought. He also introduced Nasr to the writings of René Guénon (1886-1951), which helped him to define his worldview. Along with the work of Guénon, the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the Sinhalese (Sri Lankan) metaphysician, art historian, and main advocate of the traditional philosophy, were to become Nasr's main guide in this field. By sheer coincidence, Nasr was able to use Coomaraswamy's library, which introduced him not only to the writings of the latter, but also to other propagators of the perennial philosophy.

After graduating from MIT, Nasr pursued his graduate studies at Harvard University, earning a master's degree from the Department of Geology and Geophysics and graduating with honors in 1956. He then transferred to the Department of the History of Science and Learning to do his doctorate on the history of science with a special concentration on Islamic science. He completed his studies in 1958. At Harvard, he came under the influence of such figures as Bernard Cohen, who taught him the general history of science; Harry Wolfson, who taught him Islamic philosophy and theology; and Hamilton Gibb, with whom he studied general Islamic civiliza-

tion and history. At Harvard, he also became closely associated with and interested in Catholic thought. Nasr mentions that he had an encounter with Henry Kissinger, professor of government at Harvard at that time, but that he was not attracted to the intellectual message of his courses.

His years at Harvard, moreover, enabled him to form strong contacts with such prominent European intellectuals as Louis Massigou and Henri Corbin. In fact, he became a friend and close associate of Corbin. Most importantly, in Europe he met the representatives of the perennial philosophy and tradition, among them Frithjof Schuon, an outstanding metaphysician; Titus Burckhardt, who influenced him in the fields of traditional cosmology and the traditional philosophy of art; Marco Pallis, who guided him to the metaphysics of Tibetan Buddhism; and Martin Lings, the main propagator of traditional Islam and Sufism, with whom he has maintained a close association until the present time. These figures, along with Guénon and Coomaraswamy, exercised a great influence upon Nasr's intellectual formation and shaped his worldview for the rest of his life. Nasr expresses his debt to them in this way: "I can hardly over-emphasise the influence of these figures on my intellectual formation."¹⁰

While at Harvard, he decided to spend the summers of 1957 and 1958 in Morocco. During his stay, he embraced Sufism intellectually as well as existentially in a form linked especially to the spiritual lineage of Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi and Shaykh Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad. His intellectual and spiritual experiences in Morocco rooted his mind and soul in the world of tradition, intellectual certitude, and faith. In addition, it led him to discover an inner light combined with an intellectual rigor and affection for the truth and beauty.¹¹ Describing his Harvard years, Nasr states:

These years ... set my gaze more fully upon the horizon of universal and global truth in the traditional sense of the word, embracing not only the Islamic tradition which was my own, but also the Western, both Graeco-Alexandrian and Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Far Eastern and primal, and also including esoteric Judaism associated with the Kabbala, and Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions.¹²

Career and Achievements

In 1958 and after completing his doctoral work, Nasr returned to Iran. There, he began his career as associate professor of philosophy and the history of science at Tehran University's Faculty of Letters. He remained in that position until the Iranian revolution of 1979. During those years, he had a fruitful career. For example, he quickly became the youngest person (30 years

old) to hold a full professorship at the university. Nasr used his position to expand and strengthen the teaching of Islamic philosophy as a basis from which all other philosophies would be taught. In addition, he expanded the study of western philosophy in order to include more recent German and Anglo–American schools of thought as well as Indian philosophy.

He also lectured on philosophy at other institutions of learning, and was chosen to be a member of nearly all of the important government and academic councils and societies that were active in the realm of philosophy and the human sciences. From 1968-72, he was appointed dean of the faculty and, for a while, as the university's academic vice chancellor. In 1972, he became the president of Aryamehr University; in 1973, after being elected a member of the Institut International de Philosophie, a prestigious position in the field of philosophical studies, the *shahbanou* (empress) put him in charge of setting up the Imperial Academy of Philosophy, of which he became the first president. The academy became an important center for philosophical activities and managed to survive the Iranian revolution. In fact, it continues to fulfill this role until the present day.¹³

Apart from the above philosophical activities, Nasr embarked on a process to “re-educate” himself concerning the Illuminationist school of philosophy (*hikmah*). To this end, he came under the influence of three prominent traditional teachers of Islamic philosophy and gnosis (*irfan*): Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Assar, who taught him theoretical Sufism (gnosis); Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, who taught him various texts of Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and comparative philosophy, including works of other traditions (e.g., the *Tao Te Ching* [Taoism] and the *Upanishads* [Hinduism]); and Sayyid Abu'l Hasan Qazwini, with whom he studied the philosophy of Mulla Sadra, especially his *Al-Asfar al-Arba'ah* (The Four Journeys). While in Iran, he managed to establish close contacts with Henri Corbin and collaborated with him on many projects dealing with Islamic philosophy, as well as with Toshihiko Izutsu, who introduced him to Far Eastern philosophy and the aesthetics associated with Japanese culture.

Beyond Iran, and during the years 1958-79, Nasr's intellectual activities spread far and wide. Within the Islamic world, he forged extensive contacts with Pakistan, where he visited, lectured, and published many works. This was followed by Morocco, Egypt, the Gulf States, and Lebanon, where he spent the whole academic year of 1964-65 as the first Aga Khan professor of Islamic studies at the American University of Beirut. He also traveled to Turkey and met with Turkish scholars in the

fields of history, the history of science, and literature, as well as with some Sufi authorities.

Outside the world of Islam, his intellectual contacts brought him into contact with India, which he visited many times, especially in 1975, when he delivered the Azad Memorial lecture in Delhi. His lecture was published in India as "Western Science and Asian Cultures." In 1970, he visited both Japan and Australia and lectured on Islamic philosophy and Sufism. Within the context of the West, his intensive contacts during the same period were with the United States. For example, he was a visiting professor at Harvard University in 1962. He also lectured extensively in other American universities. In Europe, he visited and lectured throughout Britain, France, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, and Germany.¹⁴

In 1979, at the peak his intellectual career, Nasr was forced to leave Iran for Britain. Later on, he settled permanently in the United States. Initially, he was offered a distinguished visiting professorship at Utah University and then a full professorship at Temple University. He stayed there until 1986, when he moved to George Washington University, where he remains a professor of Islamic studies. In the United States, his intellectual activities have focused on teaching, lecturing, and writing. Nasr has lectured in various American and European cities. Chief among them were the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh University (1981) and the Cadbury lectures at the University of Birmingham (1997). He has also been actively writing on various topics of his own personal interest, such as traditional Islamic thought, Islamic philosophy, Islamic art, the history of science, and the environment. Moreover, he continues to be an active member of many institutions, societies, and foundations concerned with traditional philosophy and Islamic studies.

Nasr is considered a very prolific writer. In fact, it is difficult to give the precise number of his academic writings. It has been said that he has written about 20 books and over 200 articles on a wide range of issues and mainly from a traditional perspective. But he has also dealt with specific topics related to traditional metaphysics and the perennial philosophy. His writings have followed his intellectual development and have reflected his interest in the subjects about which he has written. The majority of his works are written in Farsi and English, but some are in Arabic and French. Nasr's works have been translated into many other languages, making him one of the most widely read authors of our time.

Among his most influential works that were either written or translated into English are *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), *Three Muslim Sages* (1964), *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (1966), *The*

Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man (1968), *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (1975), *Sufi Essays* (1973), *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968), *An Annotated Bibliography of Islamic Science* (1976), *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (1976), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (1987), *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (1987), and *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* (1993).¹⁵

To summarize, Nasr is a scholar who has a profound and universal appreciation for intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual matters, and who combines intellectual and scholarly excellence with deep piety. A careful reading of his books cannot but lead to this conclusion. He is a philosopher, a scientist, and a poet as well, and is intimately acquainted not just with the Sufi path but also with the school of *hikmah*,¹⁶ the traditional Shi'ah school of mystical philosophy (*irfan*). Moreover, he has a broad classical education, wide-ranging cross-cultural experiences, and is well versed in western physical and social sciences, history, and philosophy, as well as classical and modern Christian doctrines and theologies, not to mention having a good knowledge of the mystical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Judaism.

Religion and Contemporary Society

Nasr's approach to the study of religion in contemporary society appears to be a response to the following two factors: the spirit's degradation in the modern world, and the interpenetration of religious forms.

The Spirit's Degradation in the Modern World

While others launch their critiques of the rampant materialism and widespread atheism that characterize the modern world, Nasr looks at the underlying causes of these visible symptoms of spiritual malaise. He stresses that one must turn to the sources of tradition in order to evaluate these underlying causes, and then mount an effective response to the intellectual challenges posed by the modern world. The modern world, as Nasr sees it, lacks clarity, purpose, and principle. Therefore, it is cut off from the transcendent, the immutable principles that govern all things and that are made known to humanity only through divine revelation in its most universal sense. Being alienated from the intellectual certainty that comes from revelation alone, the modern world is compelled to formulate a science that is based on doubt, a philosophy that is capable only of interminable change, and a culture that

has no connection with life's ultimate purpose. In the midst of such chaos, modern humanity has lost the capacity to appreciate the sacred and has lost sight of the essential and the eternal in the quest for attaining modernity's transient and superficial trappings.¹⁷

Within the context of the Muslim world, Nasr sees modernism's assault¹⁸ as threatening not only Islam, but also that which remains of the civilization created by Islam over the centuries. The West's continuous philosophical, cultural, artistic, political, economic, and social domination of the Muslim world has weakened not only the traditional Islamic institutions, but also, in his view, the fundamentals of its own tradition. In other words, western modernism has entered both the culture and the religion of Islam. Nasr holds that Islam itself has been distorted in the perception of those who, consciously or unconsciously, have assimilated western paradigms of modernism and progress. According to him, such distortions have enabled the worst forms of communist thinking to find refuge in certain brands of fundamentalism, the most apologetic forms of secular liberalism to insinuate themselves into a pseudo-Islamic framework, and the most slavish and unthinking scientism to distort the perceptions of both the state and the opposition elite in the modern Muslim world.

Troubled by this tendency and the impact of modernism on Islam and its civilization, he set himself the task of defending all of the sacred traditions, including Islam. Nasr believes that an adequate Islamic answer or response must be provided to meet the intellectual challenges posed by the modern world – a world that, in his view, is no longer tied to the transcendent and the immutable principles of its own tradition, a world in which westerners and their imitators in the East can no longer appreciate the sacred. By the same token, there is an urgent need to assert the traditional Islamic view on contemporary issues that are currently being debated. Contemporary interpretations of Islam have been added to those of the classical Orientalists and, in the process, caused confusion and distortion.

In this context, Nasr considers himself the first Muslim scholar to provide an Islamic response to the challenges of modernism. He says:

It might not be too audacious to say that I was perhaps the first Islamic thinker rooted completely in the Islamic intellectual tradition in all of its major facets who set out to provide an Islamic response to modernity on the basis of first-hand knowledge of the sources of both modern and western thought. The hands of destiny allowed me to gain this knowledge through long years of study in the West and also provided me with the opportunity to study the intellectual and spiritual aspects of Islam with

some of the greatest masters of these subjects in my home country of Persia and elsewhere.¹⁹

Thus, Nasr mounts a consistent challenge to the principal elements of this modernist outlook throughout his writings, attacking not just atheism and secularism, but also their underlying motive forces (e.g., progressivism and evolutionism). All of these false ideologies must be identified and rejected, root and branch, if one is to be liberated from the false deities of our age as well as from the idols made of ideology that modern humanity worships. He does so on the assumption that these *-isms* have the potential to destroy Muslims and Islam.²⁰

For him, one of the principal roots of the modern western mentality's predicament is its excessive reliance on rationalism:

This is not to deny the importance of human reason or to negate the Islamic understanding of man as an intelligent being or of knowledge as (a crucial) means of salvation. It is, however, to lament the fact that the intellect is commonly limited to its reflection, (which is reason). Ultimately the danger of rationalism, evident in the fate of Western Christianity, is that it leads so directly to what he calls a fatal dichotomy between faith and reason. Western man's rational faculties have become separated from what gives stability and permanence.²¹

Stability and permanence is the real issue of Nasr's stance. He consistently opposes change, reform, or anything that would dilute or negate "the transcendent and immutable (Traditional) principles," for it is in the light of these principles alone that one can judge "whether a particular form of activity or period of human society is decadent, deviated or resurgent, with the characteristics of a true"²² spirit of a rebirth, a return to the original inspiration of a given tradition. For him,

... the structure of reality is unchanging, only human vision and perception of it change. In other words, Western philosophy has lost a sense of the permanence of things. Reality has been reduced to a temporal process, which he identifies as a desacralization of knowledge and a loss of the sense of the sacred.²³

This loss of the sacred aspect of knowledge means that in every significant domain of human activity and thought, a choice presents itself: either to choose a form of knowledge and a way of thinking that focuses on change, multiplicity, and outwardness, or to choose one that integrates change within the eternal, multiplicity within unity, the outward facts within inward princi-

ples. One obvious example of this choice is that today, people have to choose between a type of creationism that appears sacred but irrational, and the Darwinian theory of evolution that appears rational but is utterly opposed to the essential idea of the spirit having priority over matter. For Nasr,

... the whole modern evolutionary theory is a desperate attempt to substitute a set of horizontal, material causes in a unidimensional world to explain effects whose causes belong to other levels of reality, to the vertical dimensions of existence.²⁴

Nasr, then, sets out to expose the illegitimacy of all the *-isms* that characterize our times.²⁵ One key aspect of this undertaking is to reverse the process whereby desacralized reason has been brought to bear on sacred traditions and then to revive an awareness of the sacred quality of knowledge. Such sacred knowledge, according to him, is not the exclusive preserve of Islam, but is to be found wherever there is fidelity to the sacred origin of any revealed tradition. Therefore, he asserts that while traditional Islam provides the structure for assimilating the sacred, that which is traditional in other religions also offers an appropriate structure. Even though it differs outwardly from Islam, it gives access to the sacred in itself, which is one with Islam in its essence.²⁶

Aware of the pressure placed by modernism on tradition, he suggests that the only way out of this predicament is to understand the modern world in depth and to respond to its challenges not through emotionalism, but through the knowledge of the tradition in its fullness. In other words, the intellectual challenges posed by modernism can only be answered intellectually and not juridically. According to him, tradition's successful engagement with modernism will not happen simply because its proponents express their anger with modernism and display their own self-righteousness. Rather, a successful engagement can occur only when modern thought's roots and ramifications are fully understood, and the tradition, in its fullness, is brought to bear on solving the problems that modernism poses for tradition.

At the center of this task lies the revival of the wisdom lying at the heart of each sacred tradition.²⁷ This is termed the perennial philosophy (or perennial wisdom), which not only underlies all expressions of sacred knowledge, but, according to Nasr, offers the best antidote to modernism's pretensions. Where modernism claims to have discovered new and better ways of living, acting, thinking, and being, the perennial philosophy replies by saying that, on the contrary, the supreme ideals of life and thought are beyond time and space, being situated in the eternal wisdom of the Divine,

a wisdom that is made accessible through revelation and its prolongation in tradition. Therefore, it is tradition, not modernity, that opens up the path to progress – inward, moral, and spiritual progress – for that is the only progress there is. As a result, the modern world is revealed as nothing more than a sophisticated form of degeneration.

The Interpenetration of Religious Forms

In a world of discourse formed by the ever-intensifying transmission of knowledge and information, the boundaries that previously separated religions from each other have gradually been dismantled. People now know far more about the people of other faiths than they did in the past, and different belief systems are confronted on a much wider scale than ever before. The question of how to relate to other faiths thus assumes major significance.²⁸ Secularists say that all religions are relative, and thus none are either absolute or true. Dogmatists assert that their particular religion alone is true and thus absolute, meaning that all others are false. Nasr advocates another view: All religions are relative when compared with the Absolute, of which they are just different expressions, and thus lead one back to the Absolute. Given this, they are absolutely necessary, despite their relativity.²⁹

And so one is compelled to acknowledge not only the validity of her/his own religion or belief system, but also to be tolerant and open to the values revealed by other religions:

[Nasr] argues that for traditional man other religions appear to be alien worlds. Because of the traditional orientation in earlier times, there was no need to move into these worlds. But because of the conditions of the modern world where the bounds of both the astronomical and religious universe have been broken, one is suddenly faced with the dilemma of acknowledging the validity of one's own tradition while attempting to be open to the truths revealed by another.³⁰

Or, in other words:

The dilemma of wishing to be able to remain faithful to one's own religion and yet come to accept the validity of other traditions is one of the result of the abnormal conditions that modern man faces and is a consequence of the anomalous conditions in which he lives. Yet it is a problem that he must face on pain of losing faith in religion itself. For a traditional Muslim living in Fez or Mashhad it is not necessary to be concerned with the verities of Buddhism or Christianity. Nor is it urgent for a peasant in the hills of Italy or Spain to learn about Hinduism. But for a person for

whom the homogeneity of a religious culture has been ruptured by modern secularist philosophies or, alternatively, affected by contact with the authentic spirituality of foreign traditions, it is no longer possible to ignore the metaphysical and theological implications of the presence of other religions. If he does so, he falls into the danger of either losing his own religion or having a conception of the Divinity which, to say the least, places a limit upon the Divine Mercy.³¹

In this context, Nasr asserts that there is a need for a science that can do justice to the study of religion. For him, this science is the perennial wisdom lying at the heart of all religious traditions,³² which he defines as

... a knowledge which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles. This knowledge which is available to the intellect is contained at the heart of all religions or traditions, and its realization is possible only through those traditions and by means of methods, rites, symbols, images and other means sanctified by the message from Heaven or the Divine which gives birth to each tradition. The "Philosophia perennis" possesses branches and ramifications pertaining to cosmology, anthropology, art and other disciplines, but at its heart lies pure metaphysics (or what the perennialists call) the science of Ultimate Reality. Metaphysics, they assert, is a veritable divine science and not a purely mental construct which would change with every alteration in the cultural fashions of the day or with new discoveries of a science of the material world. It is a knowledge which lies at the heart of religion, which illuminates the meaning of religious rites, doctrine and symbols and which also provides the key to the understanding of both the necessity of the plurality of religions and the way to penetrate into and understand other religious universes.³³

Nasr does not claim to be the originator of this perspective. In fact, he refers repeatedly to the traditionalist school, whose first expositor in the West was the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951). Guénon believed in the essential unity of tradition underlying the diversity of more or less outward forms, which are really no more than different garments clothing one and the same truth: the great primordial tradition. This tradition is not historically corroborated, but rather seems to refer to what Hindus call the "Golden Age," a time when formal outward religion was not yet necessary, for each soul was still attuned to that inward illumination from which both men and women benefited in the paradisiacal state. Formal, outward

religion becomes necessary only at a certain point in the degeneration of humanity, when all people need to be “reminded” of the higher realities that they have forgotten. The Qur’an refers to itself repeatedly as a reminder.³⁴ He stressed that intellectual intuition’s premier role is to acquire the profound knowledge underlying the dogmatic formulations in different religions that express the same wisdom, but in different forms.³⁵

While Guénon may have been the first western advocate of the Traditionalist school, Frithjof Schuon (1907-98)³⁶ is regarded as having completed the doctrines of this perspective. It is to Schuon that Nasr acknowledges the greatest debt for the development of his thought, especially his adoption of the perennial philosophy. Schuon’s impact on Nasr’s thought is so great that his writings, as a whole, might even be seen as so many extended commentaries, in academically more rigorous terms, on Schuon’s ideas. For Nasr, Schuon

... seems to be endowed with the intellectual power to penetrate into the heart and essence of all things, and especially religious universes of form and meaning, which he has clarified in an unparalleled fashion as if he were bestowed with that divine gift to which the Qur’anic revelation refers as the language of the birds.³⁷

In his writings, Nasr stresses that the issue of religious pluralism can be solved for Muslims within the context of Sufism. As for the adherents of other faiths, it can be facilitated within the context of the perennial philosophy. Thus, “he attempts to solve the problem for religious diversity by suggesting that all religions are forms of the everlasting truth which has been revealed by God to humankind through various agencies.” In other words, he sees “the reality of religions as different manifestations of the immutable and everlasting truth within the context of the perennial philosophy.”³⁸ This is based on his conviction that no form can totally express or define the essence of the Absolute, and that every true, revealed religious form expresses something of the Absolute.

Thus, for Nasr, humanity’s salvation becomes possible only when the values of tradition are rediscovered. As such, he claims that the perennial philosophy constitutes “a proper ground for the study of religions, because it is able to give full consideration and appreciation of each religion’s sacred qualities, since it believes the sacred is the highest value.”³⁹ Hence, it is more appropriate than any other approach. It also possesses a unique quality: It speaks of knowledge that can change or transform a person. He asserts that the sacred knowledge contained within the perennial philoso-

phy⁴⁰ requires a sacred quality in the knower and, therefore, seeks to have an impact upon the existential life of the seeker after truth.⁴¹

Here, it might be useful to state what Nasr's approach is not. First, it is not pseudo-esoterism, a point of view that sees all religions as being the same, thus overlooking their formal differences and belittling what pseudo-esoterists usually refer to (in a derogatory manner) as theological dogmas, all in the name of a supra-formal essence that they believe they can attain without the need to submit to a particular religion. Second, he does not advocate antinomianism (viz., that moral laws are relative in meaning and application), for the law is always upheld. If there is one principle that all traditional authors repeat, it is that each religion's orthodoxy is not limited to the exoteric level, but applies to the esoteric level as well.

Third, Nasr's approach cannot be considered syncretic, defined as putting different religious elements together and claiming that a new religious way has been discovered. For him, even though truth is perceived distinctly by each religion, it is still the same truth. Thus, he says that

... to have lived any religion fully is to have lived all religions and there is nothing more meaningless and even pernicious than to create a syncretism from various religions with a claim to universality while in reality one is doing nothing less than destroying the revealed forms which alone make the attachment of the relative to the Absolute, of man to God, possible.⁴²

The perennial philosophy is not, as we stressed earlier, evolutionism (always emphasizing the primordial *fitrah*) or liberalism, for a strict criterion of divine origin is applied to any religious belief or practice. Therefore, it can speak of authentic religion and pseudo-religion without falling into either narrow dogmatism or secularist indifference to truth in the name of tolerance. Moreover, it opposes any view that sees a particular manifestation of the truth as the "Truth" as such. Hence, it insists that only the Absolute is absolute. All else is relative, even though some relativities lead to the Absolute and others lead to nothingness. In other words, he combines a reverence for sacred forms as pathways to the Absolute while maintaining a rigorously metaphysical distinction between the absolute and the relative.

We should note that Nasr has been severely criticized on certain issues. For example, it has been alleged that:

- His emphasis of an esoteric/exoteric dichotomy in Islam and bias toward esotericism does not correspond to the traditional Islamic

viewpoint of Sufism, which requires strict adherence to the Shari`ah in order to achieve closeness to God;

- His attempts to link Sufism with Shi`ism, by asserting that the former has its essential origin in the latter's concept of hidden esoteric knowledge, exhibits a pro-Shi`ah bias;
- His reliance on Neoplatonism⁴³ to provide a basis for his esotericism and perennialism, and supporting its use by asserting the divine origin of Greek philosophical concepts. This contrasts with the refutation of those concepts by some classical Islamic scholars; and
- The concept of the perennial philosophy to which he adheres leads, when he combines it with Sufism, him to the conclusion that all religions are esoterically true, something that orthodox traditional Islam would find difficult to accept.

There does not seem to be much basis to these allegations, although it is true that the thesis of the transcendent unity of religions needs to be defined more carefully in terms of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, taking into account the reasons why orthodox Muslims will find such a thesis unacceptable. Regarding the question of the Shari`ah, there is no doubt that Nasr upholds it in principle and in practice, for he stresses that there can be no authentic pursuit of the esoteric path outside of the exoteric framework of the Shari`ah.

As for Nasr being a Shi`ah, this is clearly one dimension of his identity. However, it neither determines the principles he expounds in his writings nor produces any prejudice, for he asserts that Islam's esoteric values come not from any particular branch of the religion, but exclusively from the Qur'an and the soul of the Prophet. He regards everything else as peripheral.

As for his appreciation of Neoplatonism, he is certainly not the first Muslim to consider that the knowledge acquired by the classical Greeks had its origins in revelation. This is an arguable point, which is difficult, historically, to prove one way or the other. The criterion here, as with so much of the perennial philosophy, is provided by one's own intuition combined with a careful reading of the Greek philosophers.

Conclusion

It is important to stress that Nasr's approach to the study of religion in contemporary society stems from two factors: the challenges posed by

modernism to traditions, including Islam, and the need to respond positively to these challenges. Nasr believes that modernism's assault on tradition is so serious that the response needs to be intellectual rather than judicial. In addition, there is a need for a science that can do justice to the study of religion.

In his opinion, this science is the perennial philosophy lying at the heart of all revealed religious traditions. The underlying argument for this assumption is as follows: In a world dominated by the power of communication technology and the rapid increase in knowledge and information transmission, the boundaries of religions have been broken. As such, one is compelled to acknowledge not only the validity of one's own religion or belief system, but also to be tolerant and open to the truths revealed by other religions. What makes this approach so important, especially in the current situation, is that it is the only one that can do justice to the study of religion as such, and to religions in relation to each other. In this context, Nasr seems to have an important role to play in interfaith dialogue, as well as in an intra-Muslim dialogue. Moreover, what he has to say ought to be taken seriously, at least as starting points for any discussion of the study of religion from a principled and intellectually challenging point of view.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, his *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968) and *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (London: Longman, 1975).
2. Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Surry: Curzon Press, 1998), 117.
3. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "An Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall Auxier, and Lucian Stone (Open Court Publishing Company: 2001), 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 5-11.
7. Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, 13.
8. See, for example, John Voll, "Changing Western Approaches to Islamic Studies and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Vision" in *Beacon of Knowledge: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohammad H. Faghfoory (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), 79-97.

9. The Peddi School was a Baptist school, and Nasr was required to attend church service on Sundays. Those years helped him to gain direct knowledge of Christian rites, preaching, singing of hymns, and ethics. It also familiarized him with the Bible, especially the Psalms and the Gospels. See *ibid.*, 14.
10. Cited in Reza Shah-Kazemi, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Nasr," *Dialogue* (August 2003): 7.
11. See Nasr, *An Intellectual Autobiography*, 10-27.
12. *Ibid.*, 27.
13. *Ibid.*, 32-53.
14. *Ibid.*, 30-71.
15. *Ibid.*, 34-37, 58-59, and 77-85.
16. The Ishraqi School, founded by Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi in the twelfth century, revises Neoplatonism in terms of light or illumination. Thus, light pours out from the One and forms the universe. At varying levels, this universe lacks light and becomes dark. This darkness is physical matter. In other words, illumination is a revision of Neoplatonism that solves some of the problems inherent in the earlier system. See Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Pubs., Ltd., 1997), 111-20, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 465-96.
17. See, in particular, part 1 of his *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, 1-24.
18. Modernism (or modernity) came into existence with the French revolution of 1789. The main ideas of the French revolution, now known as the Enlightenment, grew in the eighteenth century and became the foundational principles of modernity. "Central to these ideas is the supremacy of reason, expressed in scientific enquiry and giving birth to technological progress." See Gerard Kelly, *Get a Grip on the Future without Losing Your Hold on the Past* (London: Monarch Books, 1999), 133. It was believed that science would solve all social problems and create an ideal society. However, this assumption has proved to be nothing more than just another utopian promise. Modernism opposes all religions, including Islam, and its worldview is diametrically opposed to the Islamic view of sacred life. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide*, 240.
19. Shah-Kazemi, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Nasr," 6.
20. See Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, chapter 11.
21. Jane I. Smith, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Defender of the Sacred and Islamic Traditionalism," in *The Muslims of America*, Yvonne Y. Haddad (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 83.
22. Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, 125.
23. Smith, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr," 84.
24. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Edinburgh University Press: 1981), 169-70.

25. Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, 130-50.
26. On this point, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 280-308.
27. On the conflict between modernism and traditionalism, especially Islamic traditionalism, see his *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987) and *A Young Muslim's Guide*, 239-52.
28. See Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, 98-129.
29. On this issue, see Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford University Press: 1996), 9-28.
30. Smith, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr," 87.
31. See Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 125-26.
32. On the merit of the perennial philosophy in contemporary situations, see Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, 44-46.
33. See Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Curzon Press: 1993), 54.
34. See Qur'an 7:2: "... a Book revealed unto you. So let your heart no longer be oppressed by any difficulty on that account, that with it [the Book] you might warn (the erring) and teach the believers."; Qur'an 6:90: "Those were the (prophets) who received Allah's guidance. Copy the guidance they received. Say: 'No reward for this do I ask of you. This is no less than a message for the nations.'"; Qur'an 12:104: "And no reward do you ask of them for this. It is no less than a message for all creatures." See also Qur'an 11:20 and 54:17, 22, 32, and 40.
35. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 65-92 and 280-308.
36. Frithjof Schuon, a main advocator of the perennial philosophy, was born in Basle, Switzerland, in 1907 to a German family. He studied Arabic and Islamic calligraphy, traveled extensively in North Africa and the East, and established close links with Sufi, Hindu, and Buddhist authorities as well as representatives of the spiritual legacy of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. For a while, he lived in Switzerland. In 1981, he migrated to the United States, where he remained until his death in 1989. See Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Pub. Co., 1976).
37. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 107.
38. Aslan, *Religious Pluralism*, 22-23.
39. *Ibid.*, 44.
40. On the relationship between Islam and the perennial philosophy, see Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*.
41. *Ibid.*, 44.
42. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Reality of Islam*, rev. and updated (London: Aquarian, 1994), 16.
43. Neoplatonism started with the teaching of Plotinus, who was at the center of an influential circle of intellectuals and men of letters in third-century Rome. Its essential characteristic is that the contingent universe is an outpouring from the One, rather than being His creation, and therefore shares the divine

nature to some extent. Neoplatonism was taken into Islamic philosophy under the guise of Aristotelianism, and forms the basis of the systems developed by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. For them, the universe, as an outpouring from God, is eternal with God but dependent on Him. They also taught that the human mind survives death, since only the mind is endowed with the divine outpouring from God. Essentially, Neoplatonism emphasizes the unity of all of the different levels of existence as outpourings from the Divine. For more, see M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Pakistan: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1983), 118-23; Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 30-60; and Nasr and Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 165-78 and 231-47.