



Interview

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: On Tradition, Metaphysics, and Modernity

*Interview by Taimur Aziz, with research by Saim Raza, Derek Lee,
and Lynnea Shuck*

Taimur Aziz (TA): The mention of “Tradition” is extensive throughout your works with reference to a variety of fields including philosophy, religion and art. Moreover, you identify as belonging to the “Traditionalist school.” What is “Tradition,” and what role does it play in perennial philosophy?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (SHN): The meaning of “tradition” as used by traditionalists such as myself does not mean custom or transmitted habit, but principles of a divine order and their applications to various domains. I can quote for you from one of my own writings:

Tradition . . . means truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, avatars, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles to different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge with the means for its attainment. (*Knowledge and the Sacred* [SUNY Press, 1989], 67–68)

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University and an Islamic philosopher. He holds degrees in mathematics and physics, geology and geophysics, and history of science from MIT and Harvard. Professor Nasr is the author of over fifty books and five hundred articles which have been translated into many major Islamic, European and Asian languages. These works deal with a wide array of subjects including perennial philosophy, Sufism, metaphysics, Islamic philosophy and science, traditional art, and the environmental crisis. The only Muslim thinker to have a volume dedicated to him in the prestigious Library of Living Philosophers series, Professor Nasr is one of the foremost authorities on Islamic, religious, and comparative studies in the world today. In this interview, Professor Nasr talks to us about some fundamental questions regarding tradition, the Perennial School of thought, the relation of science and religion, and the environmental crisis. E-mail: shnasr@gwu.edu.

TA: Perennial Philosophy is distinct from religious syncretism in that it insists on maintaining the boundaries of individual religions on the external level. Can you elaborate upon this distinction between the two schools of thought?

SHN: There is a radical difference. Perennial philosophy as understood traditionally believes that each religion has an inward or essential and an outward or formal aspect or dimension. On the formal level religions are different and since these forms in orthodox and traditional religions are sacred and sacrosanct, they must be respected on their own level and not mixed together or neglected. Traditional perennial philosophy is therefore opposed strongly to syncreticism and pseudo-esoterism. Of course on the intellectual level a religion can borrow certain elements from another tradition to express its own truths as we see for example in St. Augustine and Christian Platonism in general but that is very different from using rites of the Greek religion as part of the Christian mass. As for religious syncreticism, as ordinarily understood, it is a mixing of different traditional elements into an amalgam, something that is completely opposed by traditionalist followers of the perennial philosophy.

TA: You argue that the differences in religions lie only on the formal level. However, in many cases major traditional religions disagree over fundamental tenets such as the unity of the divine being and life after death. Polytheistic and monotheistic religions do not claim to have room for each other's ideas. How does perennial philosophy, then, reconcile such basic differences between religions that seem to penetrate deeper than the formal level?

SHN: No major traditional religion rejects the unity of the Divine Principle whether it be the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism, Taoism or Confucianism. As for Buddhism, although it does not speak to the objective Pole of Reality but the subjective one, it certainly does not speak of multiple ultimate *nirvanas* or *paranirvanas*. As for mythological and primal religions, behind the multiple "masks of the gods" there is always the presence of the one supreme Spirit, for example *wakan-tanka* in the Native American traditions. Let me also mention that in the case of Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism the dualism between light and darkness involves the cosmic and moral battle between good and evil resulting in the final victory of the good. If you ask any Zoroastrian, you will find that he or she insists on being certainly a monotheist and not a dualist metaphysically and theologically speaking.

Concerning life after death, since time immemorial human beings have disposed of the body of the dead ritually and believed in life after death as the French traditionalist anthropologist Jean Servier has demonstrated amply in his *L'Homme et l'invisible*. Some religions like Confucianism have said little in their formal teachings about eschatology while others such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have spoken extensively about this matter. If, as some claim, in early Judaism there were no beliefs in immortality but later on Judaism adopted this idea from Zoroastrianism and Christianity, then why would early Jews follow the Divine Law so assiduously and even be willing to give up their earthly lives for it?

Polytheistic and monotheistic religions may not have room for each other's ideas on the exoteric level, but they certainly do on the esoteric level. As for Islam, I only need to quote a verse from one of the most famous Sufi poets of the Persian language, Shaykh Mahmūd Shabistārī:

If a Muslim were only to know what an idol is,
He would know that [true] religion (*dīn*) is in idol-worship.

Perennial philosophy reconciles formal and external differences by first of all going from the form to the essence and secondly by viewing forms not just as external forms, but as gateways to inner meanings. As Rūmī has said,

The differences between people arises from the name [form- *nām*];
When one goes to the inner meaning (*ma' nā*), there is accord and peace.

Only the Absolute is absolute in the metaphysical sense but within a particular order of reality its manifestation is in a sense still “absolute” although it is not *the* Absolute as such. It is to this former reality that F. Schuon refers as “the relatively absolute.” In various religious universes many and sometimes most ordinary believers see the “relatively absolute” as the Absolute as such and therefore limit salvation to members of their own religion. A prime example is Christianity, which absolutizes the manifestation of the Divine in Christ resulting in the famous dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* with which many Christian theologians are grappling today. Islam has a less difficult problem with this issue because of the explicit universalism of many passages of the Quran. Particularism is, however, present in all religious climes including Islam in one way or another and is a theological issue with which they all have to deal especially now that the traditional boundaries of the various religious worlds have been removed to a large extent if not completely throughout much of the world.

TA: Observing and connecting the common strands in the history of philosophy and religion seem to be a key project of perennial philosophy. However, you have previously written that perennial philosophy is a product of the process of intellection. Can you explain the nature of this process and how it contrasts with the formation of an inductive philosophy?

SHN: Yes, observing and connecting the common strands in traditional philosophies and religions is a key project of perennial philosophy but not the basic project. The basis of perennial philosophy is a knowledge that does not come from simply examining such histories and connecting them. Rather, it comes from intellection in the traditional sense, from an inner illumination or what Guénon calls intellectual intuition. Metaphysically speaking, knowledge of principles can never be the result of mere induction. The principles must first be “intellected” and their applications deduced from principial knowledge not induced from particulars. In inductive philosophy general truths are supposed to be based on the generalization of a number of known particulars. For example, if we observe hundreds of Arabs who are pious and then induce the general idea that Arabs are pious people, that is induction which, logically speaking, could be or not be true. Induction does not possess the same certitude as deduction that moves from general principles and universals to particulars.

The understanding and acceptance of perennial philosophy is based on intellection (in the traditional sense) and not just ratiocination although the perennial philosophy is not irrational and the faculty of reason can be used and has been used by authentic expositors of the perennial philosophy on the level of elaboration of some of its metaphysical truths and their applications to various domains. But by using only reason and not having recourse to intellectual intuition or intellection, as traditionally understood, it is not possible to gain an authentic comprehension of the metaphysical principles of the perennial philosophy as Suhrawardī already asserted eight centuries ago.

TA: *Central to many of your works is the idea of a universe that is hierarchical. For example, in The Need for a Sacred Science you write, "The Principle gives rise to a universe which is hierarchical, possessing many levels of existence and states of consciousness from the Supreme Principle to earthly man and his terrestrial ambience." (The Need for a Sacred Science, 56). What is the nature of this hierarchical structure and what does it constitute?*

SHN: As you know the word hierarchy is composed of the two Greek terms *hierō* and *arché* which mean sacred and origin, respectively. In the traditional worldview the Sacred Origin manifests Itself of necessity in levels and degrees that move ever farther from It yet are not severed completely from their Source. One can give the example of light which is most intense at the source but weakens as it is distanced from the source while remaining light; there are levels of strength and weakness of light ranging from the level that is close to the source of the light to one that is far removed. Traditional cosmologies were based on the basic hierarchy of creation itself, what Arthur Lovejoy called "the great chain of being." Each being stands as a particular ring in the chain, those closer to the Source being more perfect and having a greater degree of "intensity of being" like rays of light that are brightest when they are closest to the source of light. Ibn Sīnā has a treatise called *Fi marātib al-wujūd* ("On the Grades of Being") that summarizes this doctrine of the levels of existence from the Islamic point of view, very clearly and succinctly.

The idea of hierarchy involves not only existence, but also virtue, human perfection, knowledge, goodness, beauty and the like, and in a sense also their opposites. For example, there are degrees and a hierarchy in ugliness, evil, ignorance, etc. The traditional universe was dominated by the sense of hierarchy which also affected the social order, although not in the same way everywhere, as we see in the difference concerning social classes and castes in Hinduism and Islam, respectively.

The idea of hierarchy, ontologically, cosmologically, epistemologically, ethically, spiritually, aesthetically and otherwise was so central in traditional religions that in Islam it is said that a person who does not believe in hierarchy is a *zindīq* or infidel. The destruction of cosmic hierarchy in the worldview of modernism and the banishing of the orders of angels from the modern *Weltanschauung* played a major role in the secularization of cosmic reality in the West. The vision of the traditional universe in which God reigned supreme and below Him was the hierarchy of angels from archangels down to lower angelic levels, then the psychic world and finally the natural world with its own levels of the three kingdoms and the hierarchic order of various species within them, was destroyed by modern science and philosophy leading to the cosmic dislocation and alienation that modern man faces today.

TA: *You write that "Basing itself on the knowledge provided by philosophia perennis, the traditional school judges between grades of divine manifestation, various degrees and levels of prophecy, major and minor dispensations from Heaven, and lesser and greater paths, even within a single religion" (The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 26). How does a scholar of this school make these judgements between different traditions without falling into subjectivism?*

SHN: The universal teachings of the perennial philosophy from metaphysics and cosmology to anthropology and art have been already expressed magisterially by such traditional masters as R. Guénon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, F. Schuon, and T. Burckhardt along with oth-

ers. Once one understands these truths and realizes that they are objective truths embedded in the nature of reality, then one can judge various traditions and different schools within them accordingly. It is like having a yardstick which allows you to measure any distance objectively except that this yardstick is confined to the physical world whereas intellectual and spiritual “yardsticks” concern the intellectual and spiritual realm but they are as objective as the physical yardstick. The modern world possesses the physical yardstick but has lost the intellectual one, which must not be confused with reason as usually understood.

TA: A great portion of your writings is concerned with the major environmental crisis that looms over the modern world today. Moreover, you frequently write about the “dominating philosophy” of the West with respect to the environment. Can you please explain what you mean by this?

SHN: What I mean by the “dominating philosophy” of the West is the secularist, naturalist, rationalist and humanistic worldview that became the dominating philosophy of the West from the Renaissance onward. It is based on Cartesian bifurcation that still underlies the whole epistemology of modern science and most other Western academic disciplines as well. There has been during the past few decades an important attempt by a number of thinkers in the West to emphasize “holistic science” based on unity rather than on the prevalent dualism based on the famous Cartesian bifurcation of reality into the completely distinct realms of mind and matter (the *res cogitans* and *res extensa* of Descartes). But despite this attempt, what I called the “dominating philosophy of the West” continues to be dominant not only in the West itself but now in other parts of the world to the extent that they are affected by modernism that had its origin and early growth in the West.

Traditional Islamic society, like any other traditional society, did not cause the present full-blown environmental crisis nor was it aware of it until quite recently. This threatening crisis originated in the modern West and then spread elsewhere. Of course now, the Islamic world along with China, Japan, India, and other non-Western parts of the globe are all cooperating in the destruction of the natural environment. Today, in some countries in the Islamic world such as Iran, Turkey, Syria, Malaysia, and Indonesia, traditional segments of Islamic society are awakening to the reality of the environmental crisis and relearning traditional Islamic teachings about our relation to nature and our responsibilities towards God’s creatures. But this awakening is quite recent. To speak from my own experience, although my book *Man and Nature*, written originally in English, was one of the first to predict the environmental crisis, it was one of my last books to be translated into Persian, my own mother tongue. In any case without doubt interest in the preservation of the natural environment is on the rise in the Islamic world. Even in Saudi Arabia controlled by Wahhābism, many of whose followers nearly equate seeing the sacred in God’s creation with nature worship and idolatry, there is a grass-roots environmental movement led to a large extent by women.

TA: You often emphasize that the only solution to the environmental crisis is the recovery of the traditional understanding of nature as sacred. Please elaborate on this traditional understanding of nature and how it compares with the understanding of nature in the modern world.

SHN: For most, if not all, of modernized humanity, nature is a vast machine, dead and at the service of man to be mastered and exploited for his own ends, to be conquered and

dominated as Francis Bacon had said at the dawn of the modern era. Nature is abused by modern man rather than being treated as a mother, which is how traditional societies saw her; hence, the environmental crisis. I do not believe that the environmental crisis can be solved simply and only by better engineering or economics. What is needed is the rediscovery of nature as sacred. But what is the sacred? It is a quality that is ultimately and in its root divine. Modern man has lost the sense of the sacred whereas traditional man has an innate sense of it and has not needed to ask what it is. When people today say that life is sacred, they are using the notion only metaphorically, for the sacred is philosophically meaningless in the dominating scientific worldview within which the modern world lives. But the deep “feeling” for the sacred has not disappeared completely for people of faith even in our secularized world. When a devout Catholic goes to mass, he or she experiences the Eucharist as something sacred even if that person accepts the secularized worldview devoid of the sacred once he or she leaves the church and in most cases he or she cannot even define the sacred just experienced. God is the Sacred as such, one of the Names of God in Islam being *al-Quddūs*, the Sacred. We must first rediscover the Sacred that resides at the center of our being and through that rediscovery then be able to see the sacred in God’s creation, in nature as the locus of manifestation of the Sacred, as theophany.

TA: What kind of role does scientific inquiry play in the traditional Islamic society? And more importantly, how does that differ from the role science plays in today’s modern secular world?

SHN: First of all, let us make clear what we mean by “scientific inquiry.” From the point of view of the philosophy of science there has been much debate concerning this term and also the term “scientific method.” How did Einstein discover the theory of relativity or Kepler the laws of planetary motion? Certainly not through what is usually called “the scientific method” today, nor even as a direct result of what is commonly known as ordinary scientific inquiry based on experimentation, observation, etc. As a great philosopher of science once said, “science is what scientists do.” In any case coming to Islamic society, I can say that logical and rational enquiry or what would correspond to scientific enquiry today certainly did exist among Muslims as we see for example in Ibn Sīnā’s study of meteors, Ibn al-Haytham’s study of light and al-Bīrūnī’s of the specific weight of substances or his description of minerals. What was different in the traditional Islamic world from what one finds in the modern West is that in Islamic sciences many ways of knowing were accepted as legitimate on their own level, from empirical knowledge to intellectual intuition and vision. Moreover, traditional Islamic civilization was governed by a hierarchy of knowledge with which I have dealt in several of my works, whereas in the modern secular world this hierarchy has collapsed into a single accepted form of knowledge reached through the so-called scientific method. Moreover, this way of looking at science has affected much of the contemporary Islamic world itself.

TA: What loss do you think modern science has suffered as a result of its abandonment of ways of knowing other than the scientific method and the collapse of the hierarchy of knowledge?

SHN: Modern science and its effects on society suffer from not what modern science is, but what it is not and yet claims to be. It is this totalitarianism of modern science, claiming to be the only legitimate form of knowledge, that is so dangerous and even lethal for

the continuation of human life on Earth. It is from this totalitarian claim that both modern science itself and its blind acceptance by society in general suffer. Many modern scientists, however, not only do not suffer from the exclusionist and totalitarian claims associated with modern science, but they espouse them completely. They also believe avidly in the reductionism built into the modern scientific worldview, denying the legitimacy of any form of knowledge other than the scientific as authentic knowledge. In contrast, there are some scientists who realize the limitations caused by accepting the so-called scientific method as being the only path to knowledge and the suffering that both modern science and society undergo as a result of the domineering scientific philosophy. Newton in his own way was already aware of this reality.

Descartes and Galileo established modern science on the basis of pure quantity and relegated all quality to the subjective realm. They thereby created a science that discovered a great deal in the realm of the material world but at the expense of the loss of higher forms of knowledge which lost their status as authentic knowledge in the modern *Weltanschauung*. Theoretically, it would have been possible to develop modern science as a science within the hierarchy of knowledge of a metaphysical and cosmological order. But historically such a course was not followed in the West, leading to the spiritual, intellectual and psychological crisis that the modern world now faces globally with the spread of the modernistic worldwide, while the applications of this quantitative science in the form of technology have led to the environmental crisis that is now threatening human life itself on Earth.

TA: You write in Religion and the Environmental Crisis that for four hundred years, philosophers influenced by scientism have been trying to develop secular ethics but the norm by which their ideas of right and wrong are assessed continue to be the fundamental ethics laid down by religion. Do you think the secular world can establish an independent system of ethics - with regard to the environment and otherwise? If not, why?

SHN: For several centuries, as I said, numerous philosophers in the West have sought to devise ethical systems independent of religion and influenced solely by the scientific worldview, but they have not been very successful in spreading their teachings because even in the West most people still follow the teachings of religious ethics. Moreover, the basis of most secular ethical philosophies when it comes to the question of the virtues mimics what is emphasized by religion such as the cardinal virtues of humility, charity and truthfulness. Even as virulent an anti-religious philosopher as Marx based his ethics in a deeper sense on the cardinal Christian virtue of charity which he, however, secularized. If not for the sake of charity, why bother with the condition of deprived workers? In Russia, as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, Christian ethics came back in full force. In Communist China, where during the rule of Mao Confucianism was so severely attacked, the teaching and following of Confucian ethics are very much on the rise.

Ethics based on scientism has had little influence on society at large, especially outside of Western Europe, whether it be in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa or the Americas—in all of which not only have religion and religious ethics survived, but their influence is on the rise. Just look at the condition of religion in areas as different as Russia, India and the Islamic world as well as parts of what was called Christendom such as Poland along with much of the American continent. Secularized ethics has simply not had the power or innate authority to attract souls of men and women in large numbers in most parts of the world and has attracted only a minority in parts of the West where such a scientific ethics first arose.

TA: In today's world of globalization where religion has become a major subject for political, social and ideological interpretation and debate, how do you think the place of mystical traditions in religions has been affected? Do you think Sufism continues to have effect in the lives of Muslims?

SHN: In what you call "today's world of globalization," two opposing and at the same time in a sense complementary movements are taking place. On the one hand, globalization results in the destruction of local traditions, secularization of the life of both the individual and society, and even greater spread of modern Western ideas, norms, means of production, and everyday life as a whole in non-Western parts of the world. On the other hand, globalization has resulted in local reactions to preserve local cultures and beliefs. This latter reaction is associated in the realm of religion for the most part, if not totally, with what has now become known as fundamentalism. Both of these movements connected with globalization are usually opposed to mysticism understood in its traditional sense.

It is, however, important to point out that in many parts of the world, the majority of people still follow their religion in a traditional manner and are neither modernist nor fundamentalist but traditional. Among them various forms of mysticism continue to flourish as we see in such countries as Senegal, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Indonesia, as well as others in the Islamic world where, despite the presence of both modernism and fundamentalism, Sufism is still alive and in many places flourishing. Mysticism is also very much alive in Hindu India, despite the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and modernism, and in Buddhist Japan, despite its extensive modernization. Interestingly enough, interest in mysticism has also been increasing in the West itself, which is the cradle of modernism, and this rise is especially noticeable since the aftermath of the Second World War. We can see this rise not only in the spread of Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic mystical teachings in the West, but also in the attempt of some Westerners to rediscover and revive the mystical teachings of Christianity itself.

As for Sufism continuing to have an effect on the lives of Muslims, there is no doubt that such an effect continues and in recent decades even some of the modern educated people have been turning to it. There are many more doctors and engineers in Sufi orders in Cairo today than there were when Gamal Abd al-Nasser overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. Sufism also continues to affect the lives of non-Sufi Muslims through many channels, especially the arts of poetry and music. It is enough to attend a session of *qawwālī*, which has a Sufi origin, in Lahore to realize this fact.

TA: To what extent do you think the secularist movement of the West has resulted from the gradual loss of mystical traditions in Western religions?

SHN: Historically speaking, the mystical dimension of Western Christianity became marginalized, but not completely destroyed, at the end of the Middle Ages before secularism set in in the Occident. It was the loss of the metaphysical dimension of religion in the West that in fact prepared the ground for the rise of secularism. When some of the most acute European minds could not find what they were seeking within the everyday teaching of the Church, they began to search elsewhere outside of the Church and turned to secularism. It is not true that somehow through some evolutionary process Western European intellectuals became more intelligent and realized the falsehood of the religious worldview. Montaigne and Bayle were not more intelligent than St. Thomas and Meister Eckhart. Rather, there is a causal nexus between the loss of the sapiential and mystical tradition in Western Christianity and the rise of secularism in the West.