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Comment and Discussion

Seyyed Hossein Nasr **Response to Thomas Dean's review of *Knowledge and the Sacred***

For the sake of clarifying certain basic questions concerning traditional doctrines or the *philosophia perennis*, I find it necessary to provide a response to the review by Professor Thomas Dean of my *Knowledge and the Sacred*. The review as a whole displays clearly the chasm that separates the traditional point of view from the modern one and the problems created as a result of identifying tradition as simply another "ism" or school among others in the modern world. In reality, however, the traditional doctrines which I have sought to present in this book cannot under any condition be reduced to simply one modern philosophical school among others. Nor can it be used to serve as grist for the mill of that type of modern cerebral acrobatics which is usually called intellectual activity but which has nothing to do with the "intellect." The traditional doctrines cannot enter into dialogue with the antitraditional world in order to reach some kind of intermediate compromise any more than can the sacred compromise itself with the secular without ceasing to be the sacred. Tradition can only present itself as an alternative to the modern world while using the contemporary medium to present its eternal message in a language which the present-day world can comprehend.

It is this basic distinction between the traditional and the antitraditional or the sacred and the profane that Dr. Dean does not seem to take into consideration. He writes of Heidegger that he "allowed new 'sayings' of Being, fresh disclosures of transcendence and the sacred, to speak to us from the *future* of our tradition." In the traditional perspective, this function is identified with that of a prophet or an *avatar* or of a sage who functions within a universe sanctified by a revelation or "divine descent." Who was Heidegger to *allow* new "sayings" of Being? Or perhaps precisely because he was not an *avatar* or prophet, the "new sayings" are "sayings" of becoming rather than Being soon to fall into the category of the outmoded and out of date as one philosophical school replaces another in the West with the rapidity of the passing of decades.

Coming to specific points of my book, Dr. Dean writes that I consider the process of desacralization in the West to have begun with the Greeks and that therefore "the entire mainstream of Western tradition, even before the modern period, is fundamentally inadequate to redress the situation." Dr. Dean forgets the events following the Greeks, namely, the advent of the Christian religion and the Christianization of the West which I emphasized so much. This event not only stopped the process of the desacralization of knowledge but allowed the West to process a veritable traditional civilization and its own intellectual tradition, which would certainly be capable of redressing the present day situation if it had not been eclipsed by the paganism of the Renaissance and its aftermath and the little that remained of it been put to rest in recent decades.

Dr. Dean criticizes my nontemporal interpretation of the sacred as being

implicitly temporal because I place priority in the past. This criticism fails to take into consideration the fact that the Eternal Moment is itself above all temporality while being the ever-present Moment, but for us who live in the temporal process it is the Origin which is identified with that Eternal Moment, while all manifestation represents a fall from that Origin for those who exist within the downward process of the cycle of manifestation in question. That Moment is also the End, but an End which is not the result of gradual growth from but an echo and “repetition” of the Origin. The flow of a cycle of manifestation is as naturally downward as is the fall of a rock from a height. To mistake my identification of the Origin with perfection and my emphasizing the “priority of the past” with the “implicit *temporal* interpretation of reality” is to overlook the basic metaphysical law of manifestation.

I am accused of drawing “strands” from certain religions to defend the traditional solution to the multiplicity of religious forms. To call the inner or esoteric dimension of religion a “strand” is to misunderstand the very nature of esotericism. The inner or esoteric dimension of religion is not an external component or strand that is then intertwined with the exoteric. It is rather like the marrow of the bone or the blood of a living body which feeds the whole body inwardly without being itself visible. Although the veritable understanding of another religion or ecumenism in its true sense can only occur at the level of the esoteric, it affects the whole religion and not just a part of it as if the esoteric were simply a “strand.” If the esoteric dimension of Western Christianity had survived to this day, the appreciation of the traditional view of other religions would surely have been different from what one observes in the West today. This assertion is true even if Christianity presents a special case of an eso-exoterism without a distinctly marked esoteric dimension, as one finds in Judaism and Islam. If the esoteric perspective is alien to those who identify themselves with only the exoteric dimension of Judaism and Christianity, or Islam for that matter, this fact does not invalidate either its truth or its applicability. The exoteric dimension of religion is by nature concerned with forms which exclude and which can open themselves to other forms only at the expense of endangering their wholeness and integrity. The tragic consequence of so much of modern ecumenism for the wholeness and integrity of the religious life bears witness to this fact. Only the esoteric can comprehend the inner reality of other worlds of sacred form without endangering the formal exoteric world of which it is the esoteric dimension.

Dr. Dean writes that when I state that religious forms are relative, I implicate the relativity of my own metaphysical formulations. First of all, the one relativity does not necessarily imply the other. Secondly, the metaphysical formulations of which I write are not “my own,” in which case they would be the results of one subjectivity among others. Thirdly, all metaphysical formulations are points of reference for the intellection of a truth to which they allude but which they neither contain in a monopolistic sense nor exhaust. To mistake even the

traditional doctrine of the Absolute for the Absolute Itself would be to mistake traditional metaphysics for modern philosophy, which it is not. When I say the esoteric “alone” I do not, in fact, absolutize one particular metaphysical language but esoterism as such. There is only one metaphysic but many traditional languages through which it is expressed and many religions with irreducible differences which nevertheless contain in their heart that supreme science of the Real. The multiplicity of universes of sacred forms allows nevertheless the possibility of dialogue between them. But precisely because that which is most important is the question of truth and not expediency, this multiplicity of forms within which dialogue is possible excludes those philosophies which negate the primacy of the sacred and the plenary manifestations of the Logos that constitute the various religions.

To the question whether it is fair or accurate to assert that “every exoteric perspective claims, by definition, to be the only true and legitimate one,” I can only answer that it is theoretically possible even on the exoteric level to respect the religion of others. But one’s own formal religious world continues to possess legitimacy in an absolute and final way without which one would not practice one’s religion.

As for the “excessive rhetoric” of the traditional writers, it must be remembered that their opposition is not against the West but only the modern West and, in fact, modernism wherever it may be. If their tone appears excessive, it is because we live in a world in which diplomacy often prevails over truthfulness, a world which while so sharply critical of everything opposed to it never turns the sharp edge of its supposedly hypercritical faculties upon itself.

I have assessed the attempts of the modern West to understand other religions negatively, but I have taken these attempts seriously and have made a study of them. That is what I am asking for, the traditional point of view in place of the concerted “conspiracy of silence” that has gone on for years. I do not wish to have “feelings at having been passed over” considered, for the question is not that of feelings. What I wish is to have the point of view presented in this and similar books to be considered in the light of its intellectual and even scholarly merits rather than to be passed over in silence.

As for *scientia sacra* being “the only true position,” my claim is not that a particular expression of *scientia sacra* is the only true position but that *scientia sacra* itself does hold the unique key. It is remarkable how throughout the review knowledge and its verbal expressions are identified while traditionally every formulation of the *scientia sacra* provides the occasion for the intellection of a knowledge which in itself and as realized knowledge is ineffable. The Primordial Tradition, as asserted by Huston Smith, provides the key for the attainment of this knowledge through doctrines which themselves are symbolic, but it does not accept the relativization of the truth in such a manner that it becomes simply one among many “isms” in a world of contending relativities. Tradition is opposed to Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” It does not expect the disclosure of any new

truths from such a fusion. Rather, it seeks to provide the keys to enable man to understand these horizons in the exceptional situation in which he is forced to gaze upon not only the horizon of his own world but also the horizons of alien universes. There is, however, no ultimate truth in these horizons which did not exist at the beginning, at the Origin which caused the genesis of the many worlds whose horizons surround us and which we are able to contemplate across the boundaries of our own particular world.

Finally, Dr. Dean states that “the Heideggerian reading of that history of Being ‘comprehends’ Nasr’s, whereas Nasr’s reading does not comprehend the truth of Heidegger’s ontology.” I would certainly agree that my reading does not comprehend the “truth” of Heidegger’s ontology, although it does point to its falsehood for those who understand and share the traditional perspective. But I must emphasize that Heidegger’s “reading” certainly does not comprehend mine despite the presence of certain elements in him which resemble traditional teachings, for were his “reading” to comprehend the traditional doctrine of Being, it would simply cease to exist in its present form. In fact had the light of Being ever shined upon the world of Heidegger and his followers, they would not seek to deconstruct the Western tradition but to dismantle that wall of opacity which has veiled to an ever greater degree the Western tradition since the Renaissance when the mainstream of Western civilization parted ways from the millennial traditions of mankind.