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Islam and the Contemporary World: Interview with Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, I had the honour to interview Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is a Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Washington, DC, as part of the 'Muslim Heritage Interview Series'. During the interview, Nasr touched on various topics related to Islam and modernity, Sufism, spirituality, consumerism and the environment. Thirteen years had elapsed since that interview and, with so many changes having taken place across the world in this intervening period, I was keen to speak to him again on some of the core themes we discussed then and to see how things have evolved in those areas over the years. The interview with Nasr covers some rare gems and insights from his illustrious career along with the following themes - *Islamic Environmentalism, Trust, Resaclarization of the Sacred Tradition, Inspirational Scholars, The Concept of al-insān al-kāmil, Impact of Covid-19, Extremist Narratives, Globalization, Saudi 2030 Vision, Iran, Social and Geo-Political Trends, Traditionalism and Modernity*. I conducted the interview with Nasr at George Washington University in December 2022. I do hope that the readers find the interview both enlightening and beneficial.

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In 2009, I had the honour to interview Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is a professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Washington, DC, as part of the 'Muslim Heritage Interview Series'. During the interview, Nasr touched on various topics related to Islam and modernity, Sufism, spirituality, consumerism and the environment. Thirteen years had elapsed since that interview and, with so many changes having happened across the world in this intervening period, I was keen to speak to him again on some of the core themes we discussed then and to see how things have evolved in those areas over the years. A topic that I am particularly passionate about is the environment and the role that people of faith can play and/or should be playing in this space. Nasr has been one of the leading proponents of

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'environmentalism' for many decades, well before it had become a prime topic for governments and global organizations around the world as they look to stem the tide of climate change and work towards achieving the United Nations emission targets. The world has also witnessed many major climate disasters in recent years, which made discussing this topic even more relevant. Another area of particular interest to me is the role of Sufism in the Islamic tradition and contemporary world. Nasr is one of the leading scholars and academics on this subject, and so the interview provided an opportune moment for me to cover this topic, along with extrapolating some pearls, gems and rare insights from his own spiritual and intellectual journey. Nasr has also been constantly engaged in inter-faith dialogue throughout his life. With my own interest in inter-faith dialogue, I was looking for an opportunity to hear some reflections from one of the leading philosophers and theologians of our time. I had the honour to conduct the interview with Nasr at George Washington University in December 2022. Some of the core topics it covered are:

- Islamic environmentalism
- Trust (*amāna*)
- Resaclarization of the sacred tradition
- Inspirational scholars, academics and spiritual guides in Professor Nasr's life
- The concept of *al-insān al-kāmil*
- Impact of Covid-19
- Extremist narratives
- Globalization
- The Saudi 2030 Vision
- Iran
- Social and geo-political trends
- Traditionalism and modernity

I do hope readers find the interview both enlightening and beneficial.

Question 1: You were one of the first proponents of Islamic environmentalism. We recently had the COP 27 Summit in Egypt and have also witnessed the devastating impact of the floods in Pakistan. During COP 27, the principle of loss and benefit was agreed to, i.e. those countries that are not the prime emitters of pollution should not be held to ransom or become victims of the impact of climate disasters caused by countries who are high on the prime global emitters of pollution list, such as China and the US. How do you see that this area has evolved over the years, especially vis-à-vis the climate change discourse that is now at the forefront of many countries' agendas?

SHN: In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate.

As I told you 13 years ago, years that have flown by so quickly, the question of what is termed Islamic environmentalism and interest in environmental studies within the Islamic world has arisen fairly recently, as in most other parts of the non-Western world. This phenomenon has a deep reason, which I shall address in a moment.

As far as predicting that there was going to be an environmental crisis, of course the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, first published in 1962, regarding the pollution of the lakes and streams of New England, is considered to be a very significant work in awakening interest in the pollution of nature; it was important, but its focus was very local.[1] This work did not deal with the philosophical and historical foundations of what caused the environmental crisis. The first person to confront the issue from this point of view was perhaps myself. As I have written elsewhere, when I was at school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), often considered the leading scientific academic institution in this country [the US], where I was studying mathematics and physics, I became interested in the philosophy of religion and nature as a spiritual entity, which was being analysed only quantitatively in the laboratories and classes of MIT. This approach did not satisfy me at all either intellectually or spiritually. I went to Harvard and did a PhD in Islamic Studies and Philosophy and often went on trips to be alone in nature. I also went to the western states, the natural parks, and did some mountain climbing and had a close experience of nature.

The intellectual and spiritual concerns of what we were doing to nature through modern civilization, which was totally oblivious to the consequences of its worldview, led me to think about this matter deeply. I gave one or two lectures on man and nature, and the great Romanian scholar of comparative religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) of the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Chicago became very interested in what I was saying. I also saw the need for environmental studies, especially while teaching in Iran at Tehran University from the late 1950s onward. Then, in 1966, I was invited to give the Rockefeller Series of Lectures at the University of Chicago, which I agreed to do. I gave four lectures there, four nights in a row, flying from Tehran on a very short trip to do so. The text was later published as *The Encounter of Man and Nature*.[2] It became a well-known book and was translated into numerous European languages, one of the last being my own language, Persian, which shows the lack of interest of the Islamic world in these matters until quite recently.

I am well known in Iran and if I cough it is written about somewhere, but this one book was delayed, whereas most of my other books in English or French were translated into Persian fairly quickly. It is a very popular book now in Iran and came out in Cairo in Arabic recently, but only after 50 years since its original publication. It appeared in French and some other European and Islamic languages, but much earlier, and it became popular among a number of intellectual figures who were becoming interested in the environment as environmental concerns spread.

Yale University was the first American university to create a formal academic programme in 'Religion and the Environment' in which one can receive a degree. They asked me to inaugurate it and I am humbled to say that they introduced me as 'the grandfather of the environmental movement'. The Muslim world, however, is hardly aware of this matter.

Going back a bit in time, while I was in Iran, I tried very hard to create interest among the educated public in the environment and the preservation of nature. Iran is a vast country, almost the size of the area of the United States east of the Mississippi River, and three

[1]Carson, *Silent Spring*.
[2]Nasr, *Encounter*.

times the size of France. Many people do not realize this, and neither are they aware of the remarkable diversity of natural environments from dry deserts to towering mountain chains to semi-tropical forests, and green pastures. One can see the beauty and diversity of nature, and also the delicate balance in nature in Iran as well as in much of the rest of the Middle East. Climatic conditions as well as the shortage of water make the balance of nature much more delicate in that part of the world than in other regions, such as Germany for example, where the interface between plants and human beings is so different. I could tell even then in the 1970s, when I was in Iran, that very negative environmental events were taking place, especially in the industrialized world, and I tried to be a warning voice in Iran that a major crisis was taking place, but at first practically no one paid any attention.

Since I was an influential person in Iran at that time, I was finally able to attract the interest of the queen to this subject. With her help, we also influenced the shah to pay some attention to this issue in the context of the so-called progress in industrialization that was taking place at that time in Iran. We finally persuaded the government to agree to appoint a deputy prime minister with responsibility for the environment. Iran was the first country in the Islamic world to establish a governmental organization of a high order with a remit to protect the natural environment, before such countries as Egypt, Syria and Morocco, which also showed some interest in this matter at that time. After the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) said, 'All of this is Western influence', and overturned everything that had been done in this domain (such as efforts to create national parks and protected areas) and many forest animals became extinct as a result. Iran was the first Islamic country to have national parks such as that of Golestan National Park, and what happened there and in some of the other beautiful natural parks of Iran after the Revolution of 1979 is a catastrophe. I think that Ayatollah Khomeini had never heard of the environmental crisis and did not realize what it would entail. In contrast, when Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani became President of Iran (1989–1997), he realized what a catastrophe was happening and that all that had been done for the environment during the time of the shah had been undone by the illogical policy of opening up the national parks and other measures.

It is very interesting how politics operates sometimes. Rafsanjani decided to give a public lecture on the importance of the environment and then recreate a department and a deputy vice-president for environmental issues. He wanted to choose a woman who was in contact with me by mail to discuss this role. He wanted his lecture to be well prepared as he understood the significance of this issue and he asked the previous deputy prime minister in charge of the environment during the time of the shah, Eskandar Firouz (1926–2020), who was at that time still in prison, if he could prepare something. Firouz was from a well-known Iranian family, a Qajar prince, but he did not know much about Islamic ideas concerning the environment. His wife, whom I know well, used to visit him in prison and take him food and clothing. He asked her to get in touch with me and ask me to write something for him. From Washington DC, I prepared a text that was sent through her to the prison in Tehran and it was then transferred to the hands of Rafsanjani, who used it to give the first lecture by a Muslim president or king about the environmental crisis. Following this event, Iran established an environmental organization and appointed a vice president responsible for the environment. In fact, he chose a woman who was familiar with my works in both English and Persian and who, as I said, had been in touch with me.

NGOs concerned with the environment also began to appear in Iran. From that moment onwards, some other Islamic countries gradually followed Iran, which had provided a great incentive for them. My works also reached Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey, among other Muslim countries, and I also had some very good students from Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia and Indonesia, who became aware of the issue and spread interest in environmentalism. The fact that Iran took a step in this field inspired many people and soon, as already stated, many Islamic countries created departments of environmental studies. They tried to take the issue seriously despite resistance from many quarters and, even more importantly, a lot of NGOs came into being, even in Saudi Arabia where the Wahhabi ideology had no notion of the sacred quality of nature and would brand such discourse as polytheism. Nevertheless, from about the 1990s onward, environmentalism and environmental organizations began to spread in the Islamic world, although, to be honest, one must say that in many Islamic countries government attention to this matter was and remains mainly lip service. Among the governments seriously interested in the environment, besides Iran, was Morocco when King Hasan was alive, a ruler who was seriously interested in this matter and not just paying 'lip service'.

In Egypt, for example, whenever the government does not want there to be a political *khuṭba* [sermon] at Friday prayers in mosques, it orders the imams to talk about the environment. What the preachers say during the sermons, however, is usually something like, 'Don't throw your garbage into the Nile … ' Such instructions do not deal with what the environmental crisis is really about. The big factory built nearby leads to more toxic filth and pollution in the Nile then all the dirt that poor people throw into that river from their kitchen. Unfortunately, full awareness of the dimensions of the environmental crisis is still not very prevalent among the ruling classes of the Islamic world. On the positive side, however, it can be said that it is increasing fast. Especially among the younger generation of Muslims who have not yet come to political power, there is much awareness of the environmental crisis and many of them are very sensitive to the issue. It seems that God does not want us to destroy nature completely and God All Mighty has the final say on these matters, which is part of our core belief as Muslims. Here in the US, in so many families, parents are indifferent to environmental issues, wasting energy and resources, modern capitalism being based in a sense on waste, but the children are often very much against wasteful practices. Ten-year-olds are heeding environmentalism in contrast to their parents. They are against killing animals, cutting down trees, etc. It is amazing what is going on in this domain.

With reference to Pakistan, the recent climatic catastrophe, which had a devastating impact, is an important lesson for its people. A few have even begun to question the essence of belief and faith as a result of this episode. Many modern Muslims in general have lost their faith in their own tradition in its teachings dealing with God's creation, and have begun to focus exclusively on Western science and technology. They still follow the ritualistic aspects of Islam, but then God's actions in His creation are viewed mostly through the prism of Western science and technology and whatever they have stipulated is the be all and end all of everything without any further questioning. But there is a lot more questioning of modern science in Washington DC than there is in Cairo, or for that matter in Delhi. This applies not only to Islam, but also to Hinduism and other religions and civilizations of non-Western origin. However, a very interesting transformation is taking place in much of the global community, and I hope, God willing, that more and

more people in power who have positive inclinations concerning environmental issues in different countries will begin initiatives that will have concrete positive results so that people in general will feel the urgency of the crisis at hand and follow their lead.

Most people do not think about what is going to happen to their grandson in 50 years' time when there may not be enough clean oxygen to breathe. They are thinking about what to do for tomorrow's lunch. A father of nine for example, in let us say Pakistan or Iran, will go to work in the morning and drive a taxi all day because he has to feed all these people in the evening. He cannot pay attention to environmental decay, even though his work is helping to accelerate it. But if matters continue as they are today, what is going to happen a few years down the road? We cannot go on without considering the consequences of our present lifestyles.

It is really a tragedy for the Islamic world that Islam has such a rich tradition of what today would be called environmentalism, but we do not pay enough attention to it. Even if the term is not used, the reality of it exists in the Qur'an and also in traditional Islamic thought more than was the case in the West in days of old. What this new term covers is the importance of the natural environment and the impact of human beings on nature. It is one of the most significant issues of our times and I have given lectures regarding it for some 60 years all around the world. The Qur'an is a sacred scripture, and yet it swears sometimes 'By the fig and the olive' (Q 95.1),[3] which are parts of God's creation but are not even animate. Does God swear by the prophets Moses, Christ or Abraham? No, but He does swear by and takes as witness a little olive that you and I put in our mouths and in five seconds it is gone The Qur'an contains a message to man, but also includes nature. I have written often about this dimension of the Qur'an, which is, in a sense, revealed for both man and the cosmos.

As human beings, we share with other creatures this cosmos created by God. For us Muslims, when we look at the sky, we see it as part of the Islamic universe. When we look at the sun and moon, we are reminded of all the references to astronomy and nature in God's revealed scripture. There is no book among all sacred scriptures in the world, expect perhaps the I Ching and the Tao te-Ching of the Chinese religion, that deals as much with nature as the Qur'an. We Muslims have to remember this basic reality. We have such a rich tradition concerning the spiritual aspect of nature. And following our sacred text, we have developed over the centuries a very rich mystical literature in Arabic, Persian and other Islamic languages dealing with the beauty of nature, the love of nature and care for nature. The poetry of Ḥāfiẓ (1325–1390) and Saʿdī (1210–1291), for example, is full of verses inviting us to rejoice in the world because the world rejoices in God. Examples could also be given from Urdu and Turkish poetry, and in fact from nearly every Islamic language that is impregnated with spiritual poetry dealing with nature.

We do also have some English literature devoted to the spiritual aspect of nature, but English is not as rich in this domain as Arabic and Persian. For example, in the nineteenth century, a lot of people learned about the spiritual quality of nature through the Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), but they do not express that spiritual wedding in the depth that we find in our own poetic tradition. Therefore, we Muslims have no excuse whatsoever to be indifferent to environmental

[3]Translations of the Qur'an are taken from Nasr et al., *Study Quran*.

issues and the usurpation of the rights of nature. To sleepwalk through life, sitting on treasures while looking for pennies in the sand, and to sit on boxes of gold in ignorance of what is within them are not acceptable actions. We have to open our eyes.

Question 2: Would you say that the principle of amāna *(trust), which is fundamental in the Islamic tradition, is found wanting?*

SHN: Absolutely, as far as its application in the modern world is concerned, but not the principle itself. This concept is central to the Islamic tradition. Our whole existence is given by God as an *amāna* and our relationship with the world and our power of dominion over it must, from the Islamic point of view, be combined with the idea that the world is an *amāna* given to us like a child is given as an *amāna* to its parents. That means that they have control over the child, but it does not mean that they can strangle him or her or cut him or her in half. This is what we are doing with nature today. Instead of dealing with nature as an *amāna* – I am using a harsh word in this context – we are prostituting nature. We draw pleasure and enjoyment from her and extract from her whatever we want, but few of us feel responsibility towards her.

Question 3: Are you able to elaborate on what you mean by the re-sacralization of the sacred tradition and sacred science, a term that you have used in your writings?

SHN: What happened in the West after the Middle Ages is that science, philosophical thought, and in fact much of culture gradually became secularized. The religious element became increasingly separated from other domains of life and thought. A secular science developed, in which truth and falsehood had nothing to do with the religious view of the universe. Whether God exists or does not exist does not have any consequences for the formulas that modern physicists put on the blackboard for you to see, such as the formulas of quantum mechanics or for that matter classical physics. This secularization has really been the driving force of modern Western civilization, with secularism permitting the modern West to ignore so many obligations, so many conditions and dimensions of reality. This ideology gradually gained more power and has been able in practice to dominate much of the world to some extent. A lot of the success of this process came from its dynamism and energy, but there are also, of course, other factors. So, secularism became the dominant element of modern Western ideology and modernism became inseparable from secularism.

An interesting case in this matter is India. When India became independent, it announced that it was a secular state, but by 'secular' the Indians did not mean an opposition to religion as we find in the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Atatüurk (r. 1923–1938). Indians meant the independence and freedom of various religions and their separation from the government and freedom from its control. After all, you had Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians, etc., all living in India. But the West hailed this idea as an ideal of Western origin for others to follow, interpreting it according to its own understanding of secularism – the secularization of science, of the government, and in fact of human culture itself. This ideology of secularization gradually spread and became the marrow in the bone of modernism.

So, wherever modernism went, it took secularism with it, although paradoxically, outside of the West it also took Christian missionaries with it to Christianize colonized or politically weak populations. But the Christianity they were preaching was itself tainted with modernism. They were not preaching the Christianity of St Bonaventure (1221–1274), St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) or Dante (c. 1265–1321). They were propagating the Christianity of modern Western civilization, which was comfortably wed to many forms of modernism. Interestingly enough, Orthodox Christianity, which has kept traditional Christian teachings much more intact than Western Christianity, did not and does not have any missionaries. They never had any Orthodox missions in Lahore, while Orthodox Christianity is spiritually more vibrant than what we find in the West. I always give the following example to my students: In France, which was called the bride of the Church in the Middle Ages, only five to eight percent of people go to church on Sundays today. In contrast, in Russia, which was dominated by communism after Lenin (1870–1924), the communist government killed or imprisoned millions of Christians, decimated all the churches, destroyed the clergy and almost everything of a religious character. After Gorbachev (1931–2022), however, in a few years many churches were rebuilt and Christianity came back very strongly. Compare the number of people going to church in Moscow with those going to church in Paris! There is nothing further that needs to be said on this point.

Someone like me is a critic of modernism in principle, not as a result of prejudice or anger like those who shout in the streets to vent their anger. I believe that I know something about modernism. I have studied Western philosophy, science, literature, etc. for years. No Westerner can claim that I criticize the modern West out of ignorance. But I speak not from a secular point of view but from an Islamic and traditional perspective. I believe that the only solution for human beings is re-sacralization, the realization that everything in God's creation is sacred for it is created by God. All existence comes from God and He is *al-Quddūs* (the Sacred). Therefore, whatever comes from God has of necessity a sacral quality and a sacredness about it that has always been felt by traditional humanity throughout the ages. In every village from Black Africa to Indonesia, there is still something that is sacred for the people.

Modern man, however, has lost the sense of the sacred, and so we have to regain it. That is one of the reasons why I have written several books that either have the word sacred in their title or that deal with this reality, especially my Gifford Lectures, published in one of my major books, *Knowledge and the Sacred*.[4] At the heart of its concern is the re-sacralization of knowledge. In our own tradition, *ʿilm*, which means both knowledge and science, has at its heart and essence a sacred quality because God is *al-ʿAlīm* (the All-Knowing). If God did not have *ʿilm*, we would not be able to know anything. From a metaphysical point of view and in fact from the general Islamic perspective, authentic knowledge (and not just information) is sacred. It is not that Muslims did not have knowledge of weights and measures or of agriculture, which might seem to be divorced from the sacred. But for them even such forms of knowledge are also all tied to a sacred worldview. Yes, Islam produced many great scientists such as Ibn Sīnā (980–1037), al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), the polymath Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwarazmī (c. 780–c. 850), ʿUmar Khayyām (1048–1131), and the like, but their scientific worldview was always imbued with the sacred. Even Khayyām's algebra is rooted in a metaphysical understanding

[4]Nasr, *Knowledge*.

of mathematics. That is why, if a Muslim studies Khayyām, he or she does not become an agnostic, whereas, if he or she begins to study physics and mathematics in a Western university, that person often becomes agnostic, at least intellectually. The fruit is there to bear witness to what the tree is like.

Question 4: In your career and life, you have written on multiple thinkers and scholars. Is there any scholar or thinker that has inspired you more than others? Some of the names that come to mind are Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn (Martin Lings) and some of the teachers of the sacred spiritual path of Sufism such as Shaykh al-ʿAlawī and Shaykh ʿĪsā Nūr al-Dīn.

SHN: It is very hard to pin down one teacher because I have been very fortunate in having had so many great teachers. God has been very kind and generous to allow me and enable me to meet some of the foremost teachers from the Islamic world in terms of traditional knowledge as well as some of the outstanding teachers in the West. The two strands are somewhat different. As far as the West is concerned, several professors were my greatest teachers and had a deep influence upon me. One was Giorgio de Santillana (1902–1974), a famous Italian philosopher and historian of science who was my professor at MIT and from whom I learned a great deal. There were Sir Hamilton Alexander Gibb (1895–1971), the great British Orientalist who migrated to Harvard, and Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887–1974), who was also a professor at Harvard University. I studied extensively with all of them and they were my greatest professors in the West. In the Islamic world, ʿAllāma Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1903–1981), Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim ʿAṣṣār (1885–1975) and Ayatollah Sayyid Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qazwīnī (1890–1975) were my foremost teachers in Islamic thought. They all played a major role in my intellectual life. Then there is a third category that does not deal with formal academic knowledge but with the spiritual knowledge of *taṣawwuf* and among them the greatest influence on my life was Shaykh ʿĪsā Nūr al-Dīn (Frithjof Schuon; 1907–1998) and Sayyid Ibrāhīm ʿIzz al-Dīn (Titus Burckhardt; 1908–1984).

Question 5: Was there anything in particular that really struck a chord or attracted your heart about these personalities?

SHN: Yes, each in his own way. My teachers in Iran came into my life after I returned to Iran, although I had known ʿAllāma ʿAṣṣār from my childhood. He had been a very good friend of my father's. I began to study with him when I returned to Iran at the age of 25. He was a master in teaching Islamic philosophy and Sufism, as was my other major teacher in in Iran, ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī. My third major traditional teacher in Iran, Ayatollah Sayyid Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qazwīnī, was particularly masterful in the teaching of Islamic philosophy, especially Mullā Ṣadrā.

Gibb, Wolfson and de Santillana were teachers at Harvard and MIT in the early 1950s, and all left a lasting impression on me. But to answer your question, it is necessary to mention most of all my meeting and studying with Frithjof Schuon, a remarkable figure whom I met for the first time in 1956 in Europe, and with whom I remained very close until his death. The only time in my life in which I led a funeral prayer (*ṣalāt al-janāza*) was for him. He died in Bloomington in Indiana in 1998. As soon as

I met him, I was astounded at a person who had such metaphysical insight combined with spiritual presence, and who was, moreover, a person of European origin, a master of traditional doctrines and esotericism and at the same time a very devout Muslim in whose presence one could feel the *baraka* of the Prophet (PBUH) and, of course, of Shaykh al-ʿAlawī (1869–1934), the great Algerian shaykh who was Schuon's master, whom I never met personally. Meeting Schuon, however, was in a sense like meeting Shaykh al-ʿAlawī, who had a tremendous effect on my life. Sometimes I dream of him as if I am living with him.

Question 6: In South Asia, we have the famous poet Dr Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) who talks about the East and the West in his books. He talks about the ʿishq *(love) of the East and the intellectual dynamism of the West. He talks about how when you marry the two realms together you have what can be declared* al-Insān al-Kāmil *(Universal Man). Iqbal was influenced by Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (1365–1424), who referred to this concept in his major work using this very title. How would you see Islam developing with these challenges of the West and those of the East and attempting to marry them together? I posed similar questions to you when we met back in 2009 but I feel these issues are still very pertinent today and so I would welcome your thoughts on this subject.*

SHN: I do not agree with the premise of Iqbal's position. Intellectualism does not only belong to the West. In fact, my goal in life has been to revive Islamic intellectuality in terms of the tradition of Islam, which deals also with truths such as *ʿishq* (love) and the highest level of *maʿrifa (*deep awareness of the higher realities and knowledge of the Divine*)* combined with *maḥabba* (love of God). Moreover, the love of God is the foundation of Christianity. So, it is not true that knowledge belongs to the West and love belongs to the East so let us combine the two. This kind of thinking was prevalent in nineteenth-century Indian writings by people who came to know the West, a group that included both Indian Muslims and Hindus. But this kind of thinking is not true and I do not subscribe to it.

Question 7: What about the notion of a balanced individual in a state of equilibrium between the two worlds coming together as a synergy?

SHN: I believe that there are three grand paths to God in every integral religion East and West:

1. The path of action and service
2. The path of love, devotion, and sacrifice
3. The path of knowledge

In Arabic they are called *makhāfa*, *maḥabba* and *maʿrifa* – they all rhyme with one another. We also use these terms in Persian, Urdu and various other Islamic languages. Each religion, to be complete, must possess all the three possibilities even if not with the same emphasis. In some religions – Christianity, for example – the path of knowledge is hard to find but it is not totally absent. Christianity is essentially a path of love, sacrifice and devotion. The path of Judaism is essentially a path of fear, but in it there is the

Kabbalah, which is a path of *maʿrifa*, and Hassidism that emphasizes love and devotion. In Islam, all three elements have been preserved until now. The idea of the fear of God is strongly present in the Islamic tradition to remind us that 'The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God' (*raʾs al-ḥikma makhāfat Allāh*),[5] a fear that leads to the love and knowledge of God. The view of some modern Christians who say that one should not fear God but just love Him, and that no matter what you do God will forgive you, and who then go on to commit major sins, is totally alien to Islam and our point of view. The fear of God is very necessary in religion as a whole and also in any authentic spiritual path. Such Muslim authorities as Imam al-Ghazzālī (1058–1111) have elaborated on this truth. He said that the difference between God and man or God and His creation is that when you fear a creature, you run away from it – whether it is a human being or a tiger in the jungle – whereas when you fear God, you run towards Him. That element of fear is always there, as is the element of love.

Islam is ultimately a path of knowledge – *lā ilāha illa Allāh* (there is no divinity but God) is a statement of knowledge not of action, devotion, service or love. But to reach that knowledge you have to go through those other stages of action and love. That is why you can say that *lā ilāha illa Allāh* also means *lā ḥubba illa Allāh* (there is no love but God), and *lā qudra illa Allāh* (there is no power but God or there is no ultimate Actor but God, etc.). He is the ultimate Reality, Beauty and Power. Therefore, we should fear going against His will in addition to loving and knowing Him.

Question 8: In recent times the world has been coping with the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19, which led to lockdowns, major digital shifts, and transformations in human behaviour, psychological impacts, ways of living and how people behave and work, etc. As an academic and scholar of the Islamic tradition, what do you see are the pros and cons of this digital change and transformation that we are witnessing today and the interface of this with the classical Islamic tradition?

SHN: First of all, most of this digitalization in our lives is very negative. What really happened was that, during the Industrial Revolution, the power and dexterity of man to make things was taken out of his hands and put into machines. In the cybernetic revolution of our times, the mind is taken from the human being and put into the machine. The result is that a great many things are produced, but in reality, people grow inceasingly ignorant. The power of our memory also diminishes because we rely on this little gadget that we always carry with us and depend upon so much. For example, if we ask it when Napoleon lived, we receive our answer with the press a button; the result is that we do not need to rely on our memory.

We should not forget how important memory is for the Islamic tradition and traditional Islamic learning. In traditional Islamic education, a child usually begins by memorizing verses of the Qur'an. Now, why would one memorize something when it is all available on your computer? In fact, there has been a lot of transfer of some of the functions of the mind to computers, of course, but this has not taken place completely, in the same way as the transfer of dexterity from man to machine was not total and complete during the Industrial Revolution. There were and are certain actions that human beings had to

[5]Also in Judaism and Christianity: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 10.27).

carry out themselves using their dexterity and artistic creativity, and they still have to do so to a large extent, when, for example, designing a house or a boat. But if we were living in the fifteenth century, workers would be working with their hands to make something; they would not be standing as they are today on a factory line, repeatedly pressing a button with rows of products coming out all made by a machine.

Now, thanks to the cyber revolution, human beings are experiencing a similar fate. In the same way, however, that the dominance of the machine did not cover every aspect of human life, the cyber revolution does not cover everything, no matter how hard some try to make it so. One should not, therefore, be despondent, and one should resist this trend as much as possible. One of the worst consequences of modernism is that many people think that they should have whatever is out there and do whatever can be done. In effect we now have a consumer society with all the means of advertising and so forth encouraging human beings not to 'fall behind' but to buy every new product that appears. Correct choices for people in the contemporary world have decreased, but they have not been destroyed completely.

Question 9: We are sadly now in an age when the narratives of extremism, hate and bigotry are filling our world in various guises. Take for example, a country like India, which we have briefly touched on during this conversation, where there are multiple sacred traditions in terms of heritage and language that people love and cherish. These have been tarnished in the last few years with the Hindutva ideology and the narrative that is reverberating across the world. We have also seen the emergence of the religious right here in the US and this movement is now coming to the fore. How do you see this epilogue playing out from a faith prism perspective and what do you feel is the best way to counter it?

SHN: What has happened in the last few decades is the rise of phenomena that are in a sense both opposite and complementary. One is the further spread of modernism and secularism into the East, further diluting our religion, our beliefs, our cultural values. But parallel with that phenomenon and complementary to it is the desire to go back to our roots and to cling to what is at risk of being lost. There is what one can call a revivalism in various domains of society and culture all the way from Malaysia to Morocco. Even in America itself, people are demonstrating in the name of the revival of Christianity and often in favour of Trump, but where were they during the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt (r. 1933–1945)? Such people were rarely there. This current form of religious revival is a completely modern phenomenon. So, this trend towards returning to religious roots and tradition is not even limited to the East. Even in the secularized West itself, it exists in its own particular form and sometimes problems emanating from it come back to haunt segments of Western society.

A perceptible reaction is taking place to emphasize self-identity in the face of globalization leading to isolationism as opposed to opening the doors to all kinds of exports, a phenomenon that we see now in so many places. One the one hand, McDonald hamburgers are sold on many streets in Kuala Lumpur and, on the other hand, new restaurants of genuine Malay food are opening to make sure that Malay cuisine survives. This pattern can be discerned in so many other fields and in so many places. This dynamic is most

likely to go on to a large extent, determining the course that the social and cultural life of humanity will take in the future.

Now, in the context of this revival of trying to come back to oneself and one's culture, the process is sometimes combined with excess, extremism and fanaticism, as we see all the way from the Taliban and the BJP to al-Qaeda and even the American extreme right, each operating differently according to its ideological background and prevailing factors and conditions. Even in France you now have an extremist right, which is extremist in so many ways, and you are now beginning to find the revival of fascism in Germany and Italy. So, this type of phenomenon is having an impact in multiple places. It is also being confused by some people with a return to tradition and the revival of tradition, for which we traditionalists stand. Tradition is that which can bring together human beings and society within a common worldview based on divine reality, the sacred origin of humanity and in fact of all of creation, and our common destiny. Even if a person does not believe in God, he or she is in the same boat with the rest of humanity. The earth is like a boat, and we are all in this boat together. One cannot say that because one lives in a certain location far from the pollution and other environmental disasters of Seoul and Jakarta, it means that his children and grandchildren will be safe and sound where they are. Local environmental crises have global consequences. It is interesting to note in passing what is happening in India both environmentally and religiously. India was always known as the land that was open to various religions and cultures and the most notable movement against the mechanization of life came from there with Gandhi. If he had had a tomb, however, he would be turning over in his grave today seeing what is happening to his native India and elsewhere.

KH: Would you say that this supra-national drive at the global level is not positive? We have a lot of global organizations and supra-national bodies.
SHN: No, that is a different matter from globalization, which envisages the whole world as just one village, destroying the distinct character of various traditional cultures so that whether a village is near Isfahan or Jakarta, it becomes a Western village. Globalization today means mostly Westernisation. It is this trend against which I stand.

Question 10: We have in Saudi Arabia a country that is the heart of the holy land in terms of the Islamic tradition. We have the two major grand mosques and the Saudi Vision 2030. What are your views about this project?

SHN: This idea, if it be true, has a demonic character and from the traditional point of view is catastrophic. It means the secularization of the heartland of Islam, totally opposed to the quality and meaning of Islamic art and architecture. We now have pop concerts in Saudi Arabia where 50,000 young people attend and where there are often licentious practices, while arranging a concert of classical Persian Sufi or classical Arabic music is forbidden. This is indeed a tragic situation.

Question 11: I want to take your mind and heart to a few years down the line. Imagine that it is the year 2050. Factoring in all the topics that you have touched on and points that you have stood up against in your life, what kind of world do you see as a canopy in terms of the Islamic milieu in which we shall find ourselves?

SHN: First of all, I am against futurism. The future is in the hand of God. How interesting it is that every description of the future by Western futurist scholars has turned out to be wrong. There may be small matters here and there that have come to pass as predicted, but their ideas in their totality usually turn out to be wrong.
KH: There is the concept called *al-baṣīra* (insight, clear proof, vision).
SHN: Yes, one can have spiritual and intellectual vision because God has given us *baṣīra* and we are also supposed to plan for the future to the extent possible, but I would start with the proviso that all is in God's hands. One event, one major earthquake in a big American city causing the death of a million people could change the whole history of America and in fact the whole history of the globe. I say an American city because, if it happens in Jakarta, nobody in the West will care. If a major catastrophe took place in the West, however, it could change everything. If things go on as they are, I do not foresee a major world war occurring, but modern man's spiritual crisis, as well as the environmental tragedy, will continue. But I do foresee, however, an ever-greater cultural war between this Western inspired globalization and the reassertion of traditional national identities that will have political consequences, such as Kurdish nationalism that now threatens Turkiye, Syria, Iraq and Iran, all of which have a notable Kurdish population. In this context of awareness, I also think that this infatuation with modernism and post-modernism, with all the great tragedies in which they result, will gradually diminish and wear off. I am referring here to the uses of *baṣīra* in a more outward sense. In its spiritual sense, it is usually possessed only by a few and not by the general population, and that is bound to continue.

I believe in fact that religion and spirituality will become stronger rather than weaker in the future despite the spread of secularism. There were many people in the early 1920s and 1930s who predicted that religion would die out in the second half of the twentieth century. How many people there were who wrote books on Islam who were Orientalists, famous Orientalists, and who predicted that Islam would weaken and would soon become very minor and marginalized. Not one of them predicted the coming of an Ayatollah Khomeini. All these scholars with all their titles, receiving high salaries from so many universities, could not foresee such a major event as the Islamic Revolution in Iran. So, it is not always how things appear.

Of course, as I said, a single unforeseen event could change the whole scenario. But if God permits us to just continue on our own way with the resources that we have within the situation that exists today, I believe that the struggle between tradition and modernity will continue and modernity will not be able to destroy tradition. As for tradition, it will not be able to re-establish itself fully across the whole of the earth until Imam Mahdī comes, and that of course will be an eschatological event. But as the crisis of the modern world increases, there will most likely be an increasing respect for tradition, for the sacred and for religion, while modernism and post-modernism will still have their way and wreak havoc upon the world.

KH: Do you feel that a situation like the pandemic that we have just been through as a human species almost typifies this – where people start to look for the sacred?

SHN: Yes, to a large extent. I have written something about this very issue and it was published in Jerusalem by a Jewish scholar and also in the US.[6] The pandemic shook many people's trust in the world around them. They realized how fragile the world is. That is the beginning of wisdom. A Hadith states: *raʾs al-ḥikma makhāfat Allāh* (the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God). The fear of God also means the realization that this world is not God. This world can fall away so quickly. It is very fragile. Do not put all your eggs in this basket as the basket is not as strong as many think.

Question 12: The situation that is happening in Iran with the demonstrations – what are your views in terms of the roots of this and how can it be addressed?

SHN: I usually refrain from saying anything about such issues because there are so many events and movements that are going on at the same time all over Iran. I follow them closely and I have very close relations with my country. My Persian writings are read extensively in Iran, but as for the everyday events that go on, I am not fully aware of them, so I do not want to give a scholarly appraisal of them. My personal view, to the extent that I have some knowledge of this matter, is that there is obviously some dissatisfaction with the government, partially because of the embargos. Iran has been under a stringent economic embargo for many years while, at the same time, there is also much mismanagement by the government. In addition, there has for several years been tremendous pressure from America and Western Europe for Iran to become subservient and not have nuclear arms and so forth. Iran has refused to give up its independence, and so it has borne the brunt of this pressure. The situation is not easy, but it is not as bad as the newspapers here make it out to be.

What is going on in Iran now is that this general dissatisfaction has suddenly erupted in protests. The questioning about the veil is just an excuse. There is a lot of pent-up emotion; there is opposition to many prevalent conditions. But most of the energy in this movement comes from young people. It has no recognizable leadership. What we see happening right now in Iran is nearly the same as happened during the time when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. I was in Iran then and I recognize that even some of the songs that are being sung in the protests now have the same melodies as the protest songs that were sung in 1978. The melodies have been transmitted from parents to their children, but now the words have changed. Then the words were 'the shah must go', now it is 'Khamenei must go'. But the songs and the melodies are nearly the same. Moreover, just as 45 years ago, the orchestration of protest movements is taking place to a large extent outside of Iran. When you have large demonstrations against Iran on the same day in South Korea, a country where many people do not even know exactly where Iran is, and Holland, there must be an organizing group outside Iran. It is too much of a coincidence. One could also mention France, where some women are cutting their hair to sympathize with the women of Iran and so on. This global orchestration is Western inspired and Western supported without doubt. I do not think that it is going to succeed immediately but I am hoping that it will cause

[6]Nasr, Keynote address.

the Iranian government to open its eyes more and try to carry out some meaningful reforms that make life easier for the people, God willing.

Question 13: Our tradition is based on hope. What message of hope would you like to give to the general audience and people at large at this moment in time?

It is very simple. God is always there. The Qur'an states: 'When my servants ask thee about Me, truly I am near. I answer the call of the caller when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me and believe in Me, that they may be led aright' (Q 2.186). This verse of the Qur'an should be remembered by everyone. God is always there and answers the call of those who call upon Him.

KH: Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, thank you very much for taking time out from your busy schedule to partake in this interview.

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