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## Tradition and Modernity



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# Tradition and Modernity

CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

A record of the ninth Building Bridges seminar  
Convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury  
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, May 2010

DAVID MARSHALL, *Editor*

Georgetown University Press / Washington, DC

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Joseph Lumbard and Abdullah Saeed were prevented from attending the seminar but their papers were presented at it on their behalf and are included in this volume. Paul Weston did not attend the seminar but very kindly agreed at a later stage to provide a paper on Leslie Newbiggin.



## *Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933– )*

### *From Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*

*[The tension between the traditional Muslim outlook and that of modern Western civilization]*

THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM who lives in the far corners of the Islamic world and has remained isolated and secluded from the influence of modernism may be said to live still within a homogeneous world in which the tensions of life are those of normal human existence. But the Muslim who lives in the centres of the Islamic world touched in one degree or another by modernism lives within a polarized field of tension created by two contending world views and systems of values. This tension is often reflected within his mind and soul, and he usually becomes a house divided against itself, in profound need of re-integration. If he is of an intellectual bent he sees on one side the rich, intellectual heritage of Islam as a still-living reality, a heritage which is precisely a message from the Centre and a guide for man in his journey from the rim to the Centre. It is a world view based on the supremacy of the blinding reality of God before whom all creatures are literally nothing, and then on the hierarchic Universe issuing from His Command (*Amr*) and comprising the multiple levels of being from the archangelic world to the level of material existence. It is a *Weltanschauung* based on viewing man as the “image of God” . . . as God’s vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth but also as His perfect servant (*‘abd*) obeying His every command. It is based on the idea that all phenomena in the world of nature are symbols reflecting divine realities and that all things move according to His Will and their spiritual nature (*malakūt*), which is in His Hands. It is based on the conception that only the law of God, the *Shari‘ah*, has ultimate claim upon the allegiance and respect of men and that it alone can provide for their felicity in its true sense.

On the other side and in contrast to this world view, the contemporary Muslim sees the basic assumptions of modern Western civilization, nearly all of which are the very antithesis of the Islamic principles he cherishes. He sees

philosophies based either on man considered as a creature in rebellion against Heaven or on the human collectivity seen as an ant-heap in which man has no dignity worthy of his real nature. He sees the Universe reduced to a single level of reality—the spatio-temporal complex of matter and energy—and all the higher levels of reality relegated to the category of old wives' tales or—at best—images drawn from the collective unconscious. He sees the power of man as ruler upon the earth emphasized at the expense of his servanthood so that he is considered to be not the *khalīfatallāh*, the vicegerent of God, but *khalīfah* of his own ego or of some worldly power or collectivity. He sees the theomorphic nature of man either mutilated or openly negated. He reads the arguments of Western philosophers and scientists against the symbolic concept of nature, a concept which is usually debased by being called “totemistic” or “animistic” or some other term of that *genre*, usually loaded with pejorative connotations. He is, in fact, made to believe that the transformation from seeing the phenomena of nature as the portents or signs (*āyāt*) of God to viewing these phenomena as brute facts is a major act of progress which, however, only prepares nature for that ferocious rape and plunder for which modern man is now beginning to pay so dearly. Finally, the contemporary Muslim is taught to believe that the law is nothing but a convenient agreement within a human collectivity and therefore relative and ever-changing, with the implication that there is no such thing as a Divine Law which serves as the immutable norm of human action and which provides the measures against which man can judge his own ethical standards objectively.<sup>1</sup>

### [Freedom]

As an example of the contrasts created within these fields and the dilemmas brought into being for the present-day Muslim who is aware of the world about him may be mentioned the concept of freedom. In the traditional Islamic view, absolute freedom belongs to God alone and man can gain freedom only to the extent that he becomes God-like. All the restrictions imposed upon his life by the *Shari'ah* or upon his art by the traditional canons are seen not as restrictions upon his freedom but as the indispensable aids which alone make the attainment of real freedom possible. The concept of *hurriyyah* (the word into which “freedom” is usually translated today in modern Arabic) is taken from the post-Renaissance idea of individual freedom, which means ultimately imprisonment within the narrow confines of one's own individual nature. This totally Western idea is so alien to traditional Islam that this word cannot be found in any traditional text with the same meaning it has now gained in modern Arabic. In the Islamic world-view, freedom to do evil or to become severed from the source of all existence is only an illusory freedom. The only real freedom is that which

enables man to attain that perfection which allows him to approach and ultimately become unified with the One Who is at once absolute necessity and absolute freedom. How far removed is this concept from the current Western notion of freedom, and what confusions are created within the mind of a man who is attracted by the pull of both ideas! These confusions affect nearly all of his daily decisions and his relations with nearly all the institutions of society from the family to the state. And they reflect upon art as well as morality, influencing individual patterns of behaviour in matters as far apart as sex and literary style.<sup>2</sup>

*[The traditional ‘ulamā’ and the modernists]*

There are today essentially two main classes of people in the Islamic world concerned with religious, intellectual and philosophical questions: the ‘ulamā’ and other religious and traditional authorities in general (including the Sufis), and the modernists still interested in religion. Only now is a third group gradually coming into being which is traditional like the ‘ulamā’ but also knows the modern world. As far as the ‘ulamā’ and other traditional spiritual authorities are concerned, it has already been shown that they usually do not possess a profound knowledge of the modern world and its problems and complexities. But they are the custodians of the Islamic tradition and its protectors, without whom the very continuity of the tradition would be endangered. They are usually criticized by the modernists for not knowing European philosophy and science or the intricacies of modern economics and the like. . . .

As for the second class whose attitudes have been analyzed in previous chapters, they are the product of either Western universities or universities in the Islamic world which more or less ape the West. Now, universities in the Islamic world are themselves in a state of crisis which stems from the question of identity, for an educational system is organically related to the culture within whose matrix it functions. A jet plane can be made to land in the airport of no matter which country in Asia or Africa and be identified as part of that country. But an educational system cannot be simply imported; the fact that modern universities are facing a crisis in the Islamic world of a different nature from that which is found in the West is itself proof of this assertion. The crisis could not but exist because the indigenous Islamic culture is still alive. Moreover, this crisis affects deeply those who are educated in these universities and who are usually called the “intelligentsia.” This term, like that of “intellectual,” is a most unfortunate one, in that often those so characterized are the farthest removed from the domain of the intellect in its true sense. But, by whatever name they are called, most of those who are products of Western-oriented universities have one

feature in common: a predilection for all things Western and a sense of inferiority relative to things Islamic. This sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the West . . . is the greatest malady facing the Islamic world, and afflicts most deeply the very group which one would expect to face the challenge of the West. The encounter of Islam with the West cannot therefore be discussed without taking into consideration that mentality which is in most cases the product of a modern university education, a mentality which, during the past century, has been responsible for most of the apologetic Islamic works concerned with the encounter of Islam and the West.<sup>3</sup>

*[Western and Islamic literature]*

Truly Islamic literature is very different from the kind of subjective literature we find in the writings of Franz Kafka or at best in Dostoevsky. These and similar writers are, of course, among the most important in modern Western literature, but they, along with most other modern Western literary figures, nevertheless present a point of view which is very different from, and usually totally opposed to, that of Islam. Among older Western literary figures who are close to the Islamic perspective, one might mention first of all Dante and Goethe who, although profoundly Christian, are in many ways like Muslim writers. In modern times, one could mention, on of course another level, T. S. Eliot, who, unlike most modern writers, was a devout Christian and possessed, for this very reason, a vision of the world not completely removed from that of Islam.

In contrast to the works of such men, however, the psychological novel, through its very form and its attempt to penetrate into the psyche of men without possessing any criterion with which to discern Truth as an objective reality is an element that is foreign to Islam. Marcel Proust was, without doubt, a master of the French language and his *In Search of Time Past* is of much interest for those devoted to modern French literature, but this type of writing cannot under any conditions become the model for a genuinely Muslim literature. Yet it is this very type of psychological literature that is now beginning to serve as a “source of inspiration” for a number of writers in Arabic and Persian. It is of interest to note that the most famous modern literary figure of Persia, Sadeq Hedayat, who was deeply influenced by Kafka, committed suicide because of psychological despair and that, although certainly a person of great literary talent, he was divorced from the Islamic current of life.<sup>4</sup>

*From Traditional Islam in the Modern World*

*[Traditional and “fundamentalist” Islam]*

Nowhere, however, does the veneer of Islamicity that covers so many movements claiming a revival of Islam wear more thinly than in the field of politics.

Here, while calls are made to return to the origin of Islam, to the pure message of the Quran and to the teachings of the Prophet, and to reject all that is modern and Western, one ends up by adopting all the most extreme political ideas that have arisen in Europe since the French Revolution, but always portraying them as Islamic ideas of the purest and most unadulterated kind. One therefore defends revolution, republicanism, ideology and even class struggle in the name of a supposedly pure Islam prior to its early adulteration by the Umayyads, but rarely bothers to inquire whether the Quran or *Hadith* ever used those terms or even why a movement which claims Islamicity is so direly in need of them, or indeed why the attack against traditional Muslim political institutions coincides so “accidentally” with those of the left in the modern world?

The case of ideology is very telling as far as the adaptation of modern notions in the name of religion is concerned. Nearly every Muslim language now uses this term and many in fact insist that Islam is an ideology. If this be so, then why was there no word to express it in Arabic, Persian and other languages of the Islamic peoples? Is *‘aqīdah* or *usūl al-‘aqā’id*, by which it is sometimes translated, at all related to ideology? If Islam is a complete way of life, then why does it have to adopt a 19th century European concept to express its nature, not only to the West but even to its own adherents? The truth of the matter is in fact that traditional Islam refuses ever to accept Islam as an ideology and it is only when the traditional order succumbs to the modern world that the understanding of religion as ideology comes to the fore, with momentous consequences for religion itself, not to speak of the society which is ruled in the name of religion ideology rather than according to the *dicta* of the *Shari‘ah*, as traditionally understood. To fail to distinguish between these two modes is to fail to grasp the most manifest distinction between traditional Islam and the “fundamentalist”; in fact, it marks the failure to comprehend the nature of the forces at play in the Islamic world today.<sup>5</sup>

*[Man and woman in Islam]*

No tradition can pass over in silence the central question of the relationship between man and woman in religious as well as in social life. Islam is no exception to this rule. On the contrary, traditional Islam, basing itself on the explicit teachings of the Quran and the guiding principles of the life of the Prophet, has developed the doctrine of the relationship between the male and the female and formulated the norms according to which the two sexes should live and cooperate in the social order. At a time when innovations of every sort have destroyed for most contemporary people, including many Muslims, the perennial teachings of Islam concerning the male and female relationship, from its metaphysical and spiritual to its most outward aspects, it is particularly necessary to reinstate



the traditional Islamic point of view, beginning with the metaphysical principles which govern human nature and the complementary relationship between the male and the female on the highest level.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the difference between the two sexes cannot be only biological and physical because, in the traditional perspective, the corporeal level of existence has its principle in the subtle state, the subtle in the spiritual and the spiritual in the Divine Being Itself. The difference between the sexes cannot be reduced to anatomy and biological function. There are also differences of psychology and temperament, of spiritual types and even principles within the Divine Nature which are the sources *in divinis* of the duality represented on the microcosmic level as male and female. God is both Absolute and Infinite. Absoluteness—and Majesty, which is inseparable from it—are manifested most directly in the masculine state; Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state. The male body itself reflects majesty, power, absoluteness; and the female body reflects beauty, beatitude, and infinity.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, each sex symbolizes in a positive manner a Divine aspect. Therefore, not only is sexual deviation and perversion a further step away from spiritual perfection, and a great obstacle to it, but also the loss of masculinity and femininity, and movement both psychologically and emotionally toward a neuter common type and ground implies, from the Islamic perspective, an irreparable loss and further fall from the perfection of the primordial *insān*—who was both male and female. The “neuter” person is in fact a parody of the primordial human being, who was both Adam and Eve. Islamic teachings have emphasized this point very clearly. There are in fact *hadiths* of the Prophet which allude to men dressing and acting like women and vice-versa as being signs of the world coming to an end. In Islam, both the male and the female are seen as two creatures of God, each manifesting certain aspects of His Names and Qualities, and in their complementary union achieving the equilibrium and perfection that God has ordained for them and made the goal of human existence.

The tenets of Islam based upon sexual purity, separation of the sexes in many aspects of external life, the hiding of the beauty of women from strangers, division of social and family duties and the like all derive from the principles stated above. Their specific applications have depended on the different cultural and social milieus in which Islam has grown and have been very diverse. For example, the manner in which a Malay woman hides her female beauty is very different from the way of a Syrian, a Pakistani or a Senegalese; and even within a single country, what is called the veil (*hijāb*) has never been the same among nomads, villagers and city dwellers. Nor has the complementary role of the two sexes in all walks of life prevented Muslim women from participating in nearly

all aspects of life, from ruling countries to owning major businesses in bazaars or even running butcher shops. Nor has the Islamic world been without eminent female religious and intellectual figures.<sup>8</sup>

The revolt of the sexes against that equilibrium which results from their complementarity and union is both the result and a concomitant of the revolt of modern man against Heaven. Man cannot reach that peace and harmony which is the foretaste of the paradise human beings carry at the center of their being, except by bringing to full actualization and realization the possibilities innate in the human state, both male and female. To reject the distinct and distinguishing features of the two sexes and the Sacred Legislation based on this objective cosmic reality is to live below the human level; to be, in fact, only accidentally human. It is to sacrifice and compromise the eternal life of man and woman for an apparent earthly justice based on a uniformity which fails, ultimately even on the purely earthly level, since it does not take into consideration the reality of that which constitutes the human state in both its male and female aspects.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (London: Longman, 1975), 18–19.
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. *Ibid.*, 132–33.
4. *Ibid.*, 141–42.
5. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1987), 20–21.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
8. *Ibid.*, 53–54.
9. *Ibid.*, 56.



## *Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Tradition and Modernity*

JOSEPH E. B. LUMBARD

BORN IN TEHRAN in 1933, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been at the forefront of discussions of the relation between Islam and modernity for more than four decades. He has published more than five hundred articles and more than fifty books that have been translated into some twenty languages. Nasr is one of only three intellectuals who have delivered the Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology (1980–81) and also been included in the Library of Living Philosophers (2000), the others being John Dewey (Gifford 1928–29, Library 1939) and Alfred North Whitehead (Gifford 1927–28, Library 1941). *Knowledge and the Sacred*, which resulted from his Gifford Lectures, has been referred to by Huston Smith as “one of the most important books of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup>

Nasr’s unique blend of philosophical, religious, and scientific expertise led him to write such groundbreaking works as *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (1968) and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996), which present the environmental crisis as an outer reflection of modern man’s spiritual crisis. In the 1960s and ’70s, he was one of the first philosophical voices to warn of the environmental crisis. He was also among the first scholars to introduce Western audiences to the Islamic scientific tradition in works such as *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968), and *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (1976). Moreover, his extensive work on Islamic philosophy has inspired an entire generation of scholars to engage Islamic philosophy in its own right rather than treating it as a mere footnote to the Western philosophical tradition. Nasr has also been among the most influential scholars in the field of Sufism for the last fifty years. After writing several books and essays about Sufism, Nasr penned *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (2008),

which presents Sufi teachings from within while remaining accessible to a diverse modern audience.

Nasr's contributions in any one of these fields—philosophy, Sufism, environmental studies, or comparative religion—would constitute a major contribution to intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue. But when his significant impact in each of these fields is considered together, he is arguably one of the most influential thinkers of the past fifty years. This influence has been evident in his crucial contributions to the initiative known as *A Common Word*. As the main Muslim speaker, opposite the pope, at the first Catholic–Muslim forum held at the Vatican in November 2008, Nasr called upon all participants to bring the message of understanding and reconciliation to their communities: “Those who are guides and trailblazers in religious matters must come forward and seek to bring about understanding to those in their own communities who hearken to their call. They should bring about further knowledge about the other whom they should present as friend, not enemy, to be loved and not vilified.”<sup>2</sup>

Currently university professor of Islamic studies at the George Washington University, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has had an illustrious teaching career. In 1958 he became professor of the history of science and philosophy at Tehran University, and in 1972 became chancellor of Aryamehr University in Iran where he instituted educational reforms that are still in effect today. Nasr was also the founding president of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, whose purpose was to revive the intellectual traditions of Persia and to bring them into greater dialogue with other philosophical traditions with the goal of applying the fruits of this dialogue to the exigencies of contemporary man.

## Tradition and Modernity

The conflict between tradition and modernity, regarding both humanity in general and Islam in particular, is central to many of Nasr's writings, foremost among them, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (1987), and *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (1976). To understand Nasr's position regarding this relationship, one must first understand how he defines these terms.

As employed by Nasr and other “traditionists,” such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings, “tradition” is not meant to indicate custom, habit, or inherited patterns of life and thought; rather “tradition is of sacred and divine origin and includes the continuity and transmission of that sacred message over time.”<sup>3</sup> When used in this manner, “tradition” indicates revelation and all forms of thought, art, and culture that are fashioned by it, extending the reverberations of revelation on earth, and thus serving to

remind human beings of the “Divine Center” and “Ultimate Origin” to which all must return. In delineating his own use of the term “tradition” Nasr writes: “As used by the ‘traditionists,’ the term implies both the Sacred as revealed to man through revelation and the unfolding and development of the sacred message in the history of the particular humanity for which it was destined in a manner that implies both horizontal continuity with the Origin and a vertical nexus which relates each moment of the life of the tradition in question to the meta-historical Transcendental Reality.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Nasr and other “traditionists” maintain that the term “tradition” conveys a reality that has existed as long as man has existed, Nasr also notes: “The usage of the term and recourse to the concept of tradition as found in the contemporary world are themselves, in a sense, an anomaly made necessary by the anomaly which constitutes the modern world as such.”<sup>5</sup> The aim of using the term is thus “to bring about awareness of the fundamental distinction between that reality described by this particular usage of the term ‘tradition’ and all that lacks a divine origin but issues from the merely human and sometimes the subhuman.”<sup>6</sup>

If “traditional” indicates that which remains tied to its Transcendent Origin and can also lead back to it, “modern” is for Nasr synonymous with “secular” and indicates “that which is cut off from the Transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things.”<sup>7</sup> Modernism and modernity are thus the opposite of tradition and imply “all that is merely human and now ever more increasingly subhuman, and all that is divorced and cut off from the Divine Source.”<sup>8</sup>

The sharp and uncompromising distinction that Nasr makes between tradition and modernity also entails a sharp contrast between modern man and traditional man, or what he refers to as pontifical man, who functions as a bridge between heaven and earth, and promethean man, who has rebelled against heaven. Regarding the former he writes: “Pontifical man, who, in the sense used here, is none other than traditional man, lives in a world which has both an Origin and a Center. He lives in full awareness of the Origin which contains his own perfection and whose primordial purity and wholeness he seeks to emulate, recapture, and transmit.”<sup>9</sup> He further clarifies, “Promethean man, on the contrary, is a creature of this world. He feels at home on earth, earth not considered as virgin nature which is itself an echo of paradise, but as the artificial world created by Promethean man himself in order to make it possible for him to forget God and his own inner reality. . . . Having lost the sense of the sacred, he is drowned in transience and impermanence and becomes a slave to his own lower nature, surrender to which he considers to be freedom.”<sup>10</sup>

From Nasr’s perspective, the human being “is created to seek perfection and final spiritual beatitude through intellectual and spiritual growth,” hence “man

is only man when he seeks perfection and attempts to go beyond himself.”<sup>11</sup> The traditional world is then a world that allows for the realization of these higher possibilities by reminding men and women that their true nature is not only of this world. This is not a romanticized or utopian view of tradition, for it is not mere nostalgia for the past, as some think when misreading Nasr’s use of the word “tradition.”<sup>12</sup> Nasr fully recognizes that the abode of heaven cannot but be beyond the earthly abode.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the value of a civilization lies not in its technological capabilities but in the spiritual capabilities of the members of that civilization, and the quality of human life derives not from one’s standard of living but from one’s spiritual orientation. From this perspective, the age of modernity, which makes of man an earthly creature responsible to none but himself and thus detached from his Center and ignorant of his Origin, is the lowest kind of civilization: “if the nature of man is to seek and reach the sacred, then we are *now* living in the dark ages based upon metaphysical ignorance, no matter how much we illuminate our cities at night with electricity.”<sup>14</sup>

### Tradition, Modernity, and Islam

Regarding the relationship between tradition and modernity in Islam and among Muslims, Nasr decries the inability of many contemporary Muslims to discern the true nature of modernity and the challenges its secular and promethean world view poses to any traditional religious world view: “The lack of clarity, precision and sharpness of both mental and artistic contours, which characterizes the modern world itself, seems to plague the contemporary Muslim’s understanding of modernism, whether he wishes to adopt its tenets or even to react against it. The influence of modernism seems in fact to have diminished that lucidity and blurred that crystalline transparency which distinguishes traditional Islam in both its intellectual and artistic manifestations.”<sup>15</sup>

Any attempt to reconcile Islamic philosophy and theology with modern philosophy is thus a nonstarter for Nasr, since at the level of principles and starting points, they are utterly divergent. In this vein, he decries attempts to arrive at compromise, which lead only toward theological modernism:<sup>16</sup> “I have always opposed the intellectual inferiority complex of Muslim modernists who can hardly think independently vis-à-vis whatever current or fashion of thought happens to issue from the West.”<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, Islamic philosophy, like other religious philosophies, is a traditional philosophy founded upon eternal principles while modern philosophy is founded upon the very rejection of those principles.

Given this fundamental contrast between modern philosophy and traditional philosophy, the confrontation of Islam with modern thought cannot take place

on a serious level if the primacy of the sacred in the perspective of Islam and its rejection by modern thought is not first taken into consideration. If Muslim intellectuals are to discourse with the modern West on the basis of Islamic teachings, they must acknowledge that the two are operating within different paradigms. Rather than operating within the secular Western paradigm while using a thin veneer of Islamic terminology, as is so often done, Muslims must instead evaluate the secular paradigm on the basis of the traditional Islamic paradigm and critique it accordingly. Only then can any true dialogue occur. Failing to take this initial step, modernist Muslims too often cede the ground to the modern secular humanistic worldview by allowing it to define the terms of the debate and then attempting to redefine Islam in order to better compete on those grounds.<sup>18</sup> Regarding such tendencies Nasr writes: “one cannot accept the attack against the body of Islamic tradition on the pretext of carrying out *ijtihād* by a person whose mind is cluttered by concepts of a secularist nature drawn from another civilization. Such an activity could not but bring about the destruction of the religion itself, not to speak of its philosophy and theology.”<sup>19</sup>

In arguing against incorporating modern philosophical tendencies into the body of Islamic thought, Nasr does not advocate a static orthodoxy. Rather he maintains that the only way for contemporary Islam to adequately address the issues that confront Muslims in the modern world is by affecting a renewal (*tajdid*) of traditional Islamic philosophy.<sup>20</sup> This he contrasts to “the modernist so-called reforms (*iṣlāḥ*) which usually lead to deformation rather than reformation and have moreover produced for the most part intellectually pitiful results in the present-day Islamic world.”<sup>21</sup> No matter the circumstances, Nasr insists that true renewal can only be achieved by adhering to orthodoxy understood in its most universal sense, and by allowing orthodoxy to be manifest in all its theological, philosophical, and metaphysical depth in both the exoteric and esoteric domains.

## Religion and Science

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Nasr’s critique of modernity is his unrelenting assault upon modern scientism. As a trained scientist with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and physics from MIT, a master’s degree in geology and geophysics from Harvard, and a doctorate in the history of science from Harvard, Nasr is well situated to assess the relation between religion and science in the modern world. From his perspective, science in and of itself is neutral, and the information that scientific discovery provides is true on its own plane, but science falls into error when it crosses from the realm of scientific investigation into that of scientific ideology, generalizing and absolutizing a particular



vision of the physical domain of the universe that science is able to study and then judging other disciplines in accord with that narrow vision. In this vein, what Nasr writes of Frithjof Schuon could be equally applied to himself: “[his] criticism is not of what science has discovered but of what is claimed as scientific knowledge while being only hypothesis and conjecture and of what is left aside by modern science.”<sup>22</sup> To be properly situated, the relative information provided by the physical sciences must be viewed in relation to the whole of which it is a part, for the relative cannot be fully understood only on its own terms. To bring about such an understanding, Nasr calls for a reintegration of modern science into metaphysics and the traditional cosmological sciences in which knowledge of the level of reality that each discipline is equipped to analyze is perceived through the light of higher forms of knowledge, “at the apex of which stands the knowledge of the One before which all is reduced to nothingness.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, discoveries pertaining to the lower levels of reality, those that pertain to the physical world, will become more intelligible because they are then understood not as brute facts but as manifestations of higher realities and all forms can be seen in relation to their ontological and causal principle. Such an adjustment would completely alter the contemporary understanding of the relation between religion and science.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, Nasr’s uncompromising critique of modernity derives not from disdain or hate but from his love for truth itself, for, as he maintains, “One cannot love God without rejecting that which would deny Him.”<sup>24</sup> He seeks to expose the fallacies upon which modernism is founded in order to save contemporary man from a world that denies his pontifical nature, reducing him to his rational and animal aspects and leaving him to wander in a desacralized wasteland, oblivious to his Origin and estranged from his true self, living on the periphery with no orientation towards the Center. From Nasr’s perspective, “Only tradition can provide the weapon necessary to carry out that vital battle for the preservation of the things of the spirit in a world which would completely devour man as a spiritual being if it could.”<sup>25</sup> His critique is not against any particular civilization but against that which undermines what he believes is best in all civilizations. Having been raised in the Islamic tradition, he focuses extensively upon it, but ultimately the wisdom that he seeks is “neither of the east nor of the west” (Qur’ān 24:35). It is knowledge of the infinite and eternal sacred that Nasr believes to be present in all traditional religions, and that liberates man from the fetters of his earthly limitations. For he maintains that only through such knowledge can contemporary man escape the current of errors

that is modernity, reawaken his immortal pontifical self, and reverse the spiritual and physical destruction that its promethean shadow has wrought.

### For Further Reflection

1. Is it inevitable that traditional Muslims will come to the negative view expressed by Nasr in the selection of texts of the modern concept of “freedom”? To what extent are traditional Christians likely to share his view?
2. How would representatives of the Islamic modernism criticized by Nasr respond to his description of their “inferiority complex” in relation to the modern West?
3. How convincing is Nasr’s critique of the ideologization of Islam by “fundamentalists”?

### Notes

1. Huston Smith, “Foreword” to *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William C. Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), xii.
2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “We and You—Let Us Meet in God’s Love,” exp. ver. *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2009).
3. While these thinkers are also known as “perennialists” or as representatives of the “perennial philosophy,” this essay will focus on the term “tradition” because it is the subject of the volume and to avoid confusion with many other definitions of “perennial” and “perennial philosophy.” See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 67; and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Reply to Shu-Hsien Liu,” in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 27, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone Jr. (Peru, IL: Open Court Press, 2000), 270.
4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 13.
5. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 66.
6. Nasr, “Reply to Shu-Hsien Liu,” 270.
7. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 98.
8. Ibid.
9. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 160.
10. Ibid., 161.
11. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 105.
12. In addressing this common misunderstanding, Nasr writes, “The last thing I have ever spoken of is romantic nostalgia for the past. My nostalgia has always been for that spiritual reality at the center of man’s being, that eternal home from which we have become exiled. If I defend premodern periods of culture, or what we call traditional cultures, it is because they still reflected the light of that Center to which we must all ultimately return. Far from being

based on romantic nostalgia, this perspective is rooted in the most rigorous form of realism” (“Reply to Shu-Hsien Liu,” 274).

13. For Nasr, “utopianism” is in fact a modern phenomenon whose manifestations within the Islamic world have led to fundamentalism and deformation; see *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 106–8.

14. Nasr, “Reply to Shu-Hsien Liu,” 273.

15. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 98.

16. For Nasr’s critique of “Theological Modernism,” see “Reflections on the Theological Modernism of Hans Küng” in *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 159–69.

17. Nasr, “Reply to Marietta Stepaniants,” in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 27, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone Jr. (Peru, IL: Open Court Press, 2000), 810.

18. From the perspective of the traditional school, the most obvious example of this tendency toward sycophantic capitulation in modern theology would be the work of Teilhard de Chardin, regarding whom Nasr writes, “From the traditional point of view Teilhard represents an idolatry which marks the final phase of the desacralization of knowledge and being.” *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 241.

19. Nasr, “Reply to Marietta Stepaniants,” 810–11.

20. *Ibid.*, 810.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Nasr, “Introduction” to *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Rockport, MA: Element, 1986), 47.

23. Nasr, “Response to Ibrahim Kalin,” in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 27, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone Jr. (Peru, IL: Open Court Press, 2000), 465.

24. Nasr, *Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, 46.

25. *Ibid.*, 50.