In Search of the Sacred

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In Search of the Sacred

A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought

Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo

Introduction by Terry Moore

AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein.
In search of the sacred : a conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on his life and thought / Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo ; introduction by Terry Moore.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-313-38324-3 (hard copy : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-313-38325-0 (ebook)
1. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein—Interviews. 2. Muslim philosophers—Interviews. 3. Muslim philosophers—Biography. 4. Islamic philosophy. I. Jahanbegloo, Ramin. II. Title.
B5074.N374A3 2010
181′.5—dc22 2010002983

ISBN: 978-0-313-38324-3
EISBN: 978-0-313-38325-0

14 13 12 11 10 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.
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Praeger
An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC
130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911
Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper ♾

Manufactured in the United States of America

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Introduction

The Spiritual and Intellectual Journey of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

G. K. Chesterton wrote: "There are two main moral necessities for the work of a great man: the first is that he should believe in the truth of his message; the second is that he should believe in the acceptability of his message." Seyyed Hossein Nasr has both. An Islamic philosopher of rare exemplarity, he has also been all through his life a man of dialogue with different faiths and diverse cultures. Not only has Nasr heralded a renaissance of Islamic sciences, but he has also been the agent and mediator through whom, in our day, the perennial philosophy has found a second birth. An unrelenting opponent of religious fundamentalism in all its forms throughout his career, Nasr presents his critique of modernity as a vision rooted in a traditional Muslim understanding of the world that respects both nature and human dignity.

For Nasr, the traditional world was based on an overwhelming sense of the Sacred and the Absolute, whereas the invention of modernity involved precisely the dissolution of that awareness, resulting in what Max Weber would call the "disenchantment of the world." Nasr's critique of modernity, while being a severe condemnation of secularism, is not a call for regression. Like his inspirers of the Perennialist School—René Guénon, Amanda K. Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon—Seyyed Hossein Nasr provides his reader with a rigorous definition of what he understands by the term *tradition*. Nasr considers tradition as the principal milestone for spiritual authenticity and an infinite

source of grace. Tradition, as described by Nasr, is the whole structure of thought that articulates the concepts embodied in the world of myth and symbols. This is why, according to Nasr, there has always been in the history of mankind, before the rise of modernity, an esoteric aspect to all traditions that reached to God and understood all things in God. Since the secularization of the Christian tradition and the techno-scientific domination of the world by the Western world in the last few hundred years, however, all traditions have been undergoing secularization.

Actually, Nasr's critique of secularization in the modern world is far from being an obscurantist attempt to idealize tradition. On the contrary, his attempt to reestablish the esoteric tradition has created new grounds for a genuine comparative study of religions. One begins to see here how much of Nasr's work has to do with tradition as something alive and a ceaselessly renewed insight. Nasr would himself be the first to recognize that tradition is an ever renewed vision of life. He is in a sense himself a remarkable product of the living traditions of Iran and Islam. In fact, unlike his traditionalist and perennialist predecessors, he identifies closely with a unique religious tradition that is Islam, while being an active member of the Iranian society in the years before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Still, Nasr has subscribed all his life to Meister Eckhart's formula: "If you want the kernel, you need to break the husk." Unlike his teacher Frithjof Schuon, Nasr's point of departure has been Islam and not Advaita Vedanta. However, like Schuon, he believes in the multileveled structure of Reality and the Divine Will. Esoterism is for Nasr nothing less than the most comprehensive grammar of the Self. Nasr's understanding of Schuon's notion of "quintessential esoterism" finds its true universalist perspective in the former's reading of famous Sufi thinkers such as Ibn 'Arabī or Rūmī. In his *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, Ibn 'Arabī sings:

My heart is open to all forms;
It is a pasture for gazelles
And a home for Christian monks,
A temple for idols,
The Black Stone of the Ka'bah,
The tablet of the Torah
And the book of the Quran.
Wherever God's caravans turn,
The religion of love shall be my religion
And my faith.

Following the paths of Ibn ʻArabī, Meister Eckhart, Rūmī and others, Nasr's opus is a quest for the "essential elements of communiality" among religions and a demonstration of the "transcendent unity of religions" based on an interfaith dialogue. His philosophical work includes indeed both a metaphysical and an erudite demonstration of such communiality at the summit of the great religious traditions and contains a strong response to the predominant relativism in today's world.

Another relevant aspect of Nasr's outlook is his spiritual journey toward sacred art. Very few authors have actually covered, in the manner and style of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the highlighted themes of traditional art, architecture, calligraphy, music, poetry, and prose literature in Islamic lands. Nasr treats Islamic art as a manifestation of the unity of Islam. As in the case of Islamic sciences, Islamic art, according to Nasr, came into being from a wedding between the spirit that issued from the Quranic revelation and the artistic techniques that Islamic civilization inherited from the civilizations that preceded it, especially the Persian and the Byzantine. For him, both the arts and the sciences in Islam are based on the idea of unity, which is the heart of the Islamic revelation. To understand the Islamic arts and sciences in their essence, therefore, requires an understanding of some of the principles of Islam itself.

Nasr demonstrates in his work that it is necessary and also reasonable to see Islam in a positive light despite the recent atrocities committed in its name, as is also the case with other religions. Also, like all other religions, Islam has contributed numerous positive elements to humanity. Nasr is certainly aware of the deviations and corruptions of certain currents within Islam and other religions in the modern world. However, he places the greatest emphasis on the application of spiritual principles of traditions in solving the crisis of the modern world.

Each tradition, Nasr affirms, has a wealth of principial knowledge. The resuscitation of this knowledge, he argues, would allow religions all over the globe to enrich one another and cooperate together to heal the wounds of the present-day secularized world.

In his work, Nasr traces the historical process through which Western civilization moved away from the idea of nature as sacred and embraced a worldview that sees human beings as alienated from nature and nature itself as a machine to be dominated and manipulated by them. Thus he argues that the devastation of our world has been exacerbated, if not actually caused, by the reductionist view of nature that has been advanced by modern secular science. Consequently, his goal is to negate the totalitarian claims of modern science and to reopen the way to the

religious view of the order of nature, developed over centuries in the cosmologies and sacred sciences of the great traditions.

In addition to his natural sensibility to the beauty and majesty of nature, Nasr provides a knowledge that invites his readers to reexamine traditional ideas and values in order to be able to tackle the contemporary predicament of the environmental crisis. In other words, one cannot analyze Nasr's contribution to the world of the spirit without taking into account his contribution to a new ecological vision. Nasr's work is, therefore, an organic whole that covers a plurality of dimensions such as science, metaphysics, art, religion, and so forth.

A prolific writer and a gnostic thinker, Nasr remains above all an encyclopedic mind who combines in a masterly manner his own Islamic tradition with that of the East and the West. To put it another way, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has inherited his Islamic scholarship and also perennial and comparative spiritual identity from a long and prestigious line of remarkable thinkers and wise men who provided him with a coherent and cohesive religious and civilizational framework. Through them he learned that having a real religious dialogue depends on acquiring an open mind and an open heart. Dialogue is, therefore, for Nasr, not only a pursuit of truth, but also a challenge to spiritual responsibility in a secular world heading for a forced uniformity imposed by a single set of secularized values. Nasr is quite aware of the fact that the world of the 21st century is standing at the edge of a precipice. Civilization to him, as to Gandhi, Tagore, and many other sage figures of the 20th century, is not equivalent to progress in science, technology, and industry. For Nasr, a civilization is like a living organism: it grows and changes and adapts itself to the ever-changing environments; and yet in this process, the central core and the roots of a civilization are capable of resisting historical changes, and at the same time producing new manifestations in conformity with this essential reality. This is how, in its own unique way, it offers its members paths of self-transcendence.

A true dialogue among religious traditions and civilizations must be based on a universalist outlook that enables people of different faiths to transcend their differences and arrive at unity. But Nasr is quite aware of the fact that dialogue among religions is not an easy task. He is even more concerned with the difficulty of "unlearning intolerance." "It is very easy to learn intolerance and unlearn tolerance, but difficult to unlearn intolerance," he declared at a seminar on December 7, 2004, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It goes without saying that for Nasr the fear of religions by many people goes hand in hand with the lack of

authentic knowledge about religious traditions. In his point of view, despite the modest gains made through dialogue in promoting better understanding between believers of different religions, dialogue has become increasingly vulnerable to popular mistrust in the eyes of many in the Western, but also in the non-Western, worlds. And yet, dialogue is not perceived by Nasr as an attempt to undermine one's own faith in order to preserve interfaith harmony and to promote peaceful coexistence at the expense of the destruction of the sacred traditions of various religions. Nasr has another vision for interfaith dialogue, where the goal is not to solve immediate political problems but to reach the "transcendental unity of religions." The unity claimed here is "transcendental" in the sense that it lies within the religions of the world without denying their forms.

Nasr's approach seems to hold out hope for a genuine dialogue between the Oriental and the Occidental cultures at their most profound level. According to Nasr, "the Sufi is one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to unity, from the particular to the Universal. It is this supreme doctrine of Unity . . . that the Sufis call the 'religion of love.' This love is not merely sentiment or emotions; it is the realized aspect of gnosis. It is a transcendental knowledge that reveals the inner unity of religions." There are two elements essential for Nasr in the making of traditional civilizations and also in the mutual understanding among them. One is knowledge (*'ilm*) and the other instruction (*ta'līm*). As Nasr explains, in Islam, the training of the mind was never separated from that of the soul. Islamic education is, therefore, concerned not only with the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge (*'ilm*), but also with the education of the whole being of men and women (*ta'līm* combined with *tarbiyah*). The teacher is, therefore, not only a transmitter of knowledge (*mu'allim*), but also a trainer of souls and personalities (*murabbī*).

For fifty years, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been a man in quest of truth, wisdom, and the sacred, but he has also served as a mentor to several generations of scholars in Islamic, religious, and philosophical studies. Through his writings and teachings, Nasr has been able to resuscitate the Islamic traditions of philosophy, science, and Sufism. His spiritual journey through different sacred scriptures and quest for wisdom has also been a quest for a knowledge that enables man to understand the essence of life, a wisdom that "liberates and delivers him from the fetters and limitations of earthly existence."

Today, at age 74, Nasr leads an extremely prolific intellectual life, with many future projects in hand, added to his present extraordinary corpus

of books and articles in different languages, and an intense program of lectures and meetings around the world. His work has been a significant contribution to comparative religious studies with insights from a variety of disciplines. Today, from the immensely creative pen of Seyyed Hossein Nasr comes to us answers to the pressing issues of our fractured world.

These answers appear in this book of conversations with Nasr. What began as a dialogue between two close family members and two Iranian philosophers grew into a series of conversations (recorded in Washington, D.C. in 2000–2001), comprising a sort of intellectual memoir. They retrace Nasr's life and thoughts through a journey of self-discovery. This book recounts his childhood in Iran and later his formative years as an adolescent and a young student in America. It also focuses on the stages of his career around the world (with special emphasis upon his forced exile from Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979). It is hoped that these conversations will provide a thorough introduction to Nasr's thoughts on Islam, Sufism, and Persian art, tradition, and modernism, but also a fitting history of the ideas of individuals who shaped Seyyed Hossein Nasr's thought in one way or another. This book demonstrates that not only is Nasr a skillful writer covering fascinating topics of the history of Islamic thought and Sufism, and so forth, but that he is also best at engaging in a stimulating and educating intellectual conversation. As the book's title suggests, this is the biography of the intellectual and spiritual journey of Seyyed Hossein Nasr that focuses most strongly on his quest of the sacred and his search for truth.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to the Radius Foundation for its help in producing the English edition of this book, and to Abigail Tardiff for her invaluable editorial and technical assistance.

Ramin Jahanbegloo

Who Is Seyyed Hossein Nasr?

As the famous American philosopher of religion Huston Smith has noted, it is rare indeed for both the highest accolade in philosophy and the highest accolade in theology to be bestowed upon the same individual.

The greatest honor the academic world grants to a living philosopher is the dedication of a volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers* to his work and thought; and the most prestigious recognition a thinker can receive in the field of natural theology is an invitation to deliver the

annual Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. In the year 2000, the twenty-eighth volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers* was devoted to the philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, placing him in the company of Einstein, Sartre, Russell, Whitehead, and other luminaries of 20th-century intellectual life. Fourteen years previously, Nasr had delivered the Gifford Lectures, and the text of these lectures became his magnum opus, *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

Who is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and what makes his work worthy of such international recognition? What does he have to offer our times that is so distinctive as to earn him such honors? For those who may not be familiar with his work, this brief introduction is my attempt to provide an overview of Nasr's accomplishments.

Nasr's life's work has been to expound and defend Tradition. At first glance, the prominence he gives to Tradition may puzzle the reader, because the modern ear hears *tradition* as *nostalgia*. We assume that the worldview of the past is false simply because it is outdated. But lurking behind this view is the assumption that our own vision is not subject to any kind of blindness peculiar to our times.

What makes Nasr a revolutionary thinker is his ability to throw into relief, in light of perennial truths, the false, yet unstated, cultural constructs that frame our vision of the world. Our metaphysical assumptions about the cosmos, which constrain the way we see the world around us, are so pervasive that we do not realize they exist at all. We believe, perhaps only half consciously, that other times looked at the cosmos through the filter of their own cultural biases, but that we moderns have no such filter. We think we simply see the world as it really is.

Nasr offers not only an exposure of our own false ideas, but a restoration of an unfragmented vision of reality, including the cosmos, that is rooted in something more stable than the styles of thought peculiar to any specific age or culture. Nasr makes a sharp and crucial distinction between tradition in the accustomed sense of the word, something like *folkways*, which indeed simply means customs that have been passed down from generation to generation, whose value lies in their power to unify us with our ancestors; and Tradition with a capital "T," which is our link with the Sacred, for which Nasr offers this definition: "the Sacred is the Eternal Absolute Truth as It manifests Itself in our world. It is the appearance of the Eternal in time, the Center in the periphery, of the Divine in the world of space and time. The Sacred is present in Itself and in Its manifestations." It is this connection with the Sacred that anchors Nasr's worldview.

The reader who believes in a religion whose claim to truth he accepts will understand the distinction between these two meanings of *tradition*. Religions claim not to be merely human inventions, but to have their source in revelation—a gift given directly by God to man. Now, if revelation is given at a certain point in time, but is intended to enlighten future generations as well, then there must be some means of transmitting its content through the ages. Nasr locates this vehicle of transmission in not only the doctrines, but also the rites and sacred art of what he terms "true religions." Thus the value of the past is not derived from its temporal distance from us, but from the connection it gives us, through revelation, to the Sacred here and now. For this reason, it is *only* through Tradition that we can be fully liberated from the biases of whatever cultural atmosphere we have been breathing all our lives. The value of Tradition is not that it is our path back to the past, but that it is our means of transcending our congenitally faulty vision, whose defects, without the timeless touch points of Tradition, we may not even be able to perceive.

Moreover, Nasr powerfully and brilliantly sets forth the urgency, for both man and society, of rebuilding this understanding of Tradition, lest both man and society lose all sense of purpose and descend into chaos. To see the wholeness of the worldview Nasr proposes, one must first of all be aware of the deficiencies of our own worldview, the narrowness of our culture's own pervasive myths. By throwing light on both the poverty of the modernistic vision of the cosmos and the truth of the Traditional understanding of the world, he sets forth a clear and compelling path for the seeker of Truth.

What is this impoverished worldview of modernity that Nasr seeks to expose and replace? Many of us have already accepted the idea that one of the prime ideologies of modernism we must reject is materialism, the belief that only matter exists. By rejecting materialism, we believe we transcend one of the cosmological biases peculiar to our culture. But Nasr takes us much further. Even those who are not materialists often speak as if we dwell in two separate worlds: the world of fact and matter and science, on the one hand, and the world of meaning and spirit and religion on the other. Most of us live our daily lives in the first world, and, if we strive to be what is vaguely termed "spiritual" people, we try to visit the second world as much as possible. Those who embrace a particular religion practice its rites, which are designed to raise the mind and heart to that which transcends the everyday world. Those who do not practice a religion may endeavor to be mindful of the beauty of nature or art, and to live selflessly.

But even those who recognize the existence of these two spheres—the realm of fact and the realm of meaning—have trouble integrating them. Those of us who believe, but have our footing mainly in the world of science, feel a little uncomfortable about theology, as if it were a friend with whom we would be embarrassed to be seen when people we respect are around. Or, if we orient ourselves more by our theology, we feel slightly distrustful of science—we remain always a little wary of it, in case it might reveal some fact that undermines our understanding of God. When thinkers who live mostly in the world of science add a bit of theology, it has an *ad hoc* artificial flavor to it; and when theologians speak of science, their remarks usually come across as the same kind of afterthought.

Nasr solves the problem of this bifurcation of the world by bringing Tradition into "now." He explains how the timeless truths of Tradition are not disconnected from our own times and issues. He brings the wisdom of the ages to bear on answering questions about the nature of the world and our place in it. And he lets this wisdom inform us about ourselves and about our relationships with the natural world, with the World of Spirit, and with each other. His ability to situate our world and thought within the perspective of Tradition and perennial wisdom is unequalled by any other living thinker.

In the present work and elsewhere, Seyyed Hossein Nasr contrasts today's understanding of what it means to be human with the traditional concept of man. Modern Western man understands himself according to the paradigm of Prometheus, a creature of Earth who has rebelled against Heaven. But traditional man does not reject Heaven in order to become purely a creature of Earth; instead, he sees himself as an intermediary between Earth and Heaven, standing simultaneously on both shores of existence. Traditional man understands himself not as a rebel, but as a bridge, a *pontifex*.

When one examines the life and work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, this image of a bridge emerges again and again. There are good grounds for seeing Nasr himself as a modern example of a Pontifical Man, for he bridges many shores between which there had formerly been little commerce.

A bridge cannot allow communication between two lands unless it has an equally firm foundation in each one. It is these dual foundations on many divergent pairs of shores that account for Nasr's unique contributions to our times. He enables true discourse, for example, between traditional sacred science and modern Western science; between Islamic tradition and the Western world; between Tradition and contemporary language and art; between the perennial philosophy and mainstream

Western thought; and between perennialist and modern philosophies of nature. He offers a critique of Western modernity not only from the viewpoint of Tradition, but at the same time through the eyes of one who lives within the modern West and knows this world intimately.

Philosophy and Metaphysics

One of the distinguishing bridge-making features of Nasr's work has been his ability to present the pure metaphysics of the traditional authors and classical texts in a contemporary language. In doing so, he has made this abstruse and complex discipline more accessible to the large sector of people who are attracted to "the supreme science" but who otherwise would not have encountered these ideas or understood their relevance to modern times and to themselves.

His contribution in this way to the revival of metaphysics has been twofold. First, concerning Islamic philosophy, his works have been instrumental in resuscitating the Islamic philosophical tradition and in bringing out the significance, to the English-speaking world, of the works of neglected classical Islamic philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā and Suhrawardī. Within the discipline of Islamic philosophy there is really no other work like Nasr's, which issues from the belly, or bosom, of the living Islamic philosophical tradition, but is presented to the English-speaking world as an intrinsic part of the intellectual life of both Islamic civilization and today's world. Nasr's explication of Islamic philosophy treats it not as a "history of ideas," but as living philosophy—his work seeks understanding not merely of the society of a particular period of history, but of the truth itself. Much of this resuscitation of the Islamic intellectual tradition and its presentation to the English-speaking world has come about through the production of several key works, from *Three Muslim Sages*, texts of lectures given at Harvard University in 1962, which first revealed this new methodology of the study of Islamic philosophy, to his most recent book, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*, which is a bird's-eye view of the whole tradition of Islamic philosophy, especially the later period, examined not for the light it might throw on social or intellectual history, but as authentic philosophy.

Second, in the field of Western philosophy, Nasr has synthesized and expanded the critique of the modern world that has already been carried out by Guénon, Coomaraswamy, Schuon, Burckhardt, and others, and he has furthermore been able to present this critique in an academic

language that is of sufficient rigor to be acceptable to those trained in Western academic philosophy and the Western philosophical tradition, especially Cartesianism. This accomplishment is to be seen especially in his *Knowledge and the Sacred*. The creation of a kind of nexus or link between the perennial philosophy and mainstream Western philosophy and thought is perhaps his greatest legacy in this field, and his work has had extensive influence in many circles, far beyond those interested in the more strict sense of the definition of Tradition.

Fifty years ago, when scholars in the academic world in the West spoke about philosophy, the place of the perennial philosophy was not properly recognized; and when they spoke about Islamic philosophy, they spoke about only one period of Islamic philosophy, and that only insofar as it influenced the West. Today, scholars acknowledge the continuous and long Islamic philosophical tradition in its own right. This change is greatly a result of Nasr's work, though certainly Nasr was not alone in bringing this change—the works of such scholars as Corbin, Izutsu, and others have also been instrumental. But Nasr's influence has been immense, and it is also worth noting that it was Nasr's personal influence on Izutsu that turned Izutsu's attention toward the study of Islamic philosophy and resulted in the remarkable works that he then produced. Especially notable in this part of Nasr's legacy has been his work's influence on a number of Christian theologians and philosophers of religion. His key works in this area are *Knowledge and the Sacred* and *The History of Islamic Philosophy*, of which he was the chief editor. This latter work has influenced a whole younger generation of scholars in this field and will probably remain of the greatest influence for the next generation to come.

Perennialism and Tradition

Nasr is perhaps most often thought of as a philosopher of perennialism and tradition and is, indeed, this movement's greatest living spokesman and contributor. Part of his achievement, Nasr would say, is to have remained, since his twenties, faithful to the purely traditional perspective, and not to have been swayed by the modernist ideas that are so prevalent in our times. It is this authenticity that has allowed his work not only to reformulate and reflect the ideas of the founders of traditionalism such as Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and Schuon and bring these ideas into Western academic circles, but also to apply them to domains that these earlier writers did not sufficiently address, especially

cosmology and the natural environment. Nasr's application of the perennial philosophy is unique within the traditionalist corpus of works, as we will see later with regard, for example, to his work in building a philosophical foundation for the environmentalist movement.

Not only has Nasr been a conduit for integral Islamic philosophy to come to the modern West, but he has also turned the attention of much of modern Islamic academia back to the wealth of the Islamic philosophical tradition. His work has furthermore introduced perennialism to many non-Western countries, especially in the Islamic world. In a sense, he is the first traditionalist to have an extensive impact upon the Islamic world, especially Iran, his own country, but also Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bosnia, and India—principally Muslim India, but also to a large extent Hindu India. But perhaps his most enduring legacy in both Islamic philosophy and in perennial philosophy has been the training of students. He has trained several generations of students, starting with his earliest period of teaching in Iran and followed by nearly thirty years in the United States. Many of his students have themselves understood the traditional perspective and made it their own, and have become famous scholars and writers in countries all over the world. The result of this influence has been nothing short of the establishment of a new intelligentsia in the Islamic world, which is neither the traditional *'ulama'*, who know nothing at all about the West, nor modernized Muslims who know practically nothing about their own intellectual tradition or Tradition in general. And so primarily because of Nasr's influence over the last fifty years, there now exists a new group of intellectuals of the highest order who are both strictly speaking traditionalists, and also very well acquainted with the modern world. This impact has been primarily within the Islamic world and India, but this impact has also been felt in the West, as he has also trained many Western students.

Environmentalism

In the 1960s, two books appeared warning us of the impending ecological crisis: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (1968). These two works can be considered the beginning of the "environmental movement." In the decades that have followed, Nasr has worked tirelessly in his books and lectures to expose the depths and dimensions of the ecological crisis and to explain its underlying causes.

Nasr's firm footing in both Tradition and the modern West has enabled him to hold a unique place in the environmentalist movement and particularly in its philosophical aspects. Nasr predicted today's environmental crisis years before its existence came to the attention of the media, and before it was accepted by mainstream society, precisely because he understands both the traditional view of nature and that of the modern West so well. His 1968 book *Man and Nature* identifies the crisis according to its spiritual roots, and not just its physical manifestations, by revealing the progressive loss in the West of an understanding of the sacred meaning of nature. Nasr predicts and explains the outward effects of this transformation, and shows—this is the crucial point the modern world still needs to learn from Nasr—that the only solution to the crisis is the recovery of the traditional understanding of nature as sacred. As long as this vision of nature is lacking, no improvements in engineering and technology can heal the damage we have caused and are causing to the environment.

Thirty years after his seminal *Man and Nature*, Nasr made another unique and vital contribution to the environmentalist movement. His Cadbury Lectures, published as the book *Religion and the Order of Nature*, are a key philosophical work in ecology. This work draws on all the major world religions to bring out the perennial and universal theology of nature, whose loss is the source of the devastation we see around us. Nasr writes not just as a representative of one particular religion, but as the spokesman for the perennial wisdom to be found in every traditional culture. His voice is thus the call for a restoration of the traditional understanding of the meaning of nature in a universal context transcending any particular culture or society.

Islam and the West

Nasr's contribution to the environmentalist movement is only one example of the unifying power of the perennial philosophy that he brings both to the Islamic world and to the West. By relating the traditional philosophy of the Islamic world and of the West to the perennial philosophy, he has served as the representative of perennialism at the highest level of discourse in both worlds. His deep knowledge of and respect for religious traditions other than Islam have made him an especially effective lecturer, because he speaks to the heart of all traditions. His audiences are thus able to listen to his critiques of the modern West because it is so clear that he understands and appreciates the Christian tradition as well as his own. Since his critique is always a call for a return

to the core of one's own tradition, he never comes across as an "outsider" to the people he is addressing, and he has been invited to lecture for a wide spectrum of audiences, from Catholic universities, which appreciate his emphasis on Tradition and the Sacred, to a Navajo college, which recognized him as a thinker who understands the importance of traditional knowledge and especially cosmology.

For these reasons, Nasr has been able to achieve distinction both in his critique of the West and as a peacemaker between the East and the West. Because his voice is both respectful and uncompromising, he has been an invaluable spokesman for Islam to the Western world. The media often seek him out to respond to or explain some event in the news. HarperOne commissioned him to write *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* to be published on the first anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001; he also gave the keynote address to the United Nations conference on Islamophobia in 2004.

At the same time, Nasr has been constantly active in academic circles, advancing traditionalist and perennialist teachings as well as Islamic studies. He edited *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, and continues to direct the activities of the Foundation for Traditional Studies, including its journal *Sophia*. Throughout this work he has dedicated himself to elucidating the perennial philosophy within the academy and philosophical circles. He has also worked to bring this thinking to the public and non-academic audiences. In this endeavor he has represented the voice of Islam, especially the mystical traditions and teachings of Sufism, and he has stressed their importance to both the perennialist movement and to the West at large.

Revival of Traditional Islam and Its Intellectual Tradition

Frithjof Schuon, one of the chief representatives of traditionalism, insists that all true religions are revealed by God as paths for mankind to Him, and that believers must practice their religion not only by learning its spiritual teachings, but also by performing the duties and rituals it prescribes. Nasr embraces and teaches this tenet of perennialism, but he does this as a Muslim and his own commitment to Islam is complete. He has served as an advocate for the revival of traditional Islam in two ways. First, he addresses himself to Muslims living in America and Europe, and the special problem of how to practice Islam amidst the culture of the modern West. To this end, he has written books and articles, notably *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* and *A Young Muslim's*

Guide to the Modern World, and has lectured to enthusiastic Muslim audiences in mosques and Islamic centers around the world. His own rich experience of being at home in the West, but recommitting himself as a young man to the practice of Islam—of appreciating the "good things" of the West, but recognizing at the same time the dangers of the rejection of the Sacred in the modern West—makes him a compelling speaker with a universal voice.

In this way he has been an advocate of the revival of the practice of traditional Islam in the lives of Muslims in America and around the world, but he has also concentrated on the revival of the Islamic intellectual tradition, not only in the Western world, but in the Islamic world itself. At Tehran University, he redirected the attention of the University, which had come to concentrate on French and European philosophy, back toward Islamic and Eastern philosophies. He brought a whole generation of scholars back to the richness of their own tradition, contributing monumental scholarly works toward this end, such as his *Anthology of Philosophy in Persia* (edited with M. Aminrazavi), his *Science and Civilization in Islam*, and two volumes on Islamic Spirituality for the *World Spirituality* series. His work *Three Muslim Sages* opened the door to a new understanding of the philosophical and intellectual tradition in Islam. Even before immigrating to the United States, he worked with American universities, contributing to the planning and expansion of Islamic and Iranian studies at Harvard, Princeton, the University of Utah, and the University of Southern California.

One aspect in particular of the Islamic intellectual tradition that Nasr has almost single-handedly brought back into academia has been traditional Islamic cosmology. His book *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, written over fifty years ago, is still taught today all over the world. Because Nasr is trained in modern Western science, he has dedicated much of his life to building a bridge between traditional and modern science, offering modernity a way to understand the value of traditional cosmologies, not as a merely outdated and false understanding of the universe, but as a symbolic understanding of the cosmos that speaks more than ever to our times. His book *The Need for a Sacred Science* explains what the West has lost: he exposes the false dichotomy that even some who acknowledge the importance of Tradition have unwittingly accepted, that science is the great achievement of the West, while spirituality is the great achievement of the East. It is precisely this banishment of spirituality from science—and science from spirituality—that Nasr seeks to rectify.

Religion and Science

Ever since the rise of modern science in the 17th century, there has been great interest in the dialogue between science and religion. Throughout his career, in both his teaching and his scholarly works, Nasr has focused on this dialogue. As usual, Nasr brings to the discussion a firm foundation in both worlds. His degrees in physics and mathematics from M.I.T. and in geology and the history of science and philosophy from Harvard make him well qualified to examine Western scientific principles and theories. His course "Science and Religion," which he began teaching after taking the position of University Professor at The George Washington University in 1984, won the John Templeton award in 1997 for the best course in America in science and religion. Prior to the advent of Nasr's course, the religious side of the dialogue was limited to Christian religious concepts; for example, Christianity's reaction to Darwinism is different from that of Islam, but often the dialogue between Darwinism and religion is cast solely in terms of Christianity's viewpoint. Nasr's course was, and perhaps still is, the only course in America that explores the relationship between religion and science not only in the West but also in other great traditions as well. In doing so, Nasr examines the relationship between science and religion from the perspectives of both Western and non-Western cultures. He includes discussion of religion and science from the perspectives of the ancient Egyptian and Greek traditions, as well as the living civilizations of Asia and the Far East, all in light of their own traditional sciences.

This global perspective that Nasr brings to the table, not only through his teaching but also through many academic papers and conferences, has added a whole new dimension to the debate. The broadness of Nasr's perspective allows him to defend not simply a particular religion, such as Islam or Christianity, but religion itself. And in his defense of traditional religion, he insists that the discourse between religion and science be carried out with both sides on an equal footing, for all too often science dictates the premises and religion tries to change itself to conform to what science proclaims. Nasr's work combats this "inferiority complex" on the part of religion, both by insisting that religion preserve its own intellectual status and the authenticity of its understanding of the cosmos and by exposing the falsity of many of science's claims, using modern science's own methods, which are taken to be empirically proven but which are actually open to considerable doubt.

Nasr has similarly been one of the severest critics of scientism within the Islamic world. His book *Islam, Science, Muslims and Technology* is a distillation of a lifetime's meditation on this topic. Nasr has devoted considerable energy to combating the view, prevalent in parts of the Islamic world, that the Islamic world's adoption of modern science and technology is a great glory of Islam. In light of Nasr's insistence that one must understand science not only for what it accomplishes, but also for its limitations, thinkers in Islam and other traditions can engage modern science without renouncing their own inner teachings. Before Nasr's contributions, contemporary scholarship had no access to an understanding of the nature and depth of Islamic science in its own right, not only in relation to modern Western science. Nasr's work reveals the underpinning of Islamic metaphysics, cosmologies, and philosophy not only to the West, but to Muslim scholars as well, and it provides an Islamically authentic methodology for the study of Islamic science, especially his books *Science and Civilization in Islam* and *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study*.

To appreciate the full importance of this work, one must understand the context in which it first appeared. Before Nasr's scholarship, the academic fields of the history and philosophy of science were characterized by a lack of understanding of what traditional Islamic science had been. The scope of Nasr's achievement cannot be overestimated, for it has done nothing short of demonstrating that there is another form of science besides the modern West's definition. With this understanding, he calls for the world's religious and spiritual philosophies to reclaim their contribution to science in a broader sense, a systematized knowledge of the universe. Traditional cosmological and natural sciences have much to contribute, and Nasr's perspective has been acknowledged with the inclusion of his essay on the topic in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. The editors' selection of his essay shows that certain barriers in this discourse are finally being removed.

Islamic Art

Nasr's reintroduction of the contributions of Tradition has also been especially influential in the area of traditional Islamic art, the theoretical and metaphysical foundation of which he has presented and expanded to both the Islamic world itself and to Western audiences. Nasr's work fills a void, because although others have since followed Nasr's example, when he began to write on this topic more than forty years ago, the

Islamic world had practically no explication of the religious and philosophical foundations of the theory of sacred art. At that time, the works of Burckhardt and Coomaraswamy had not become known in the Islamic world to any appreciable degree. In the West, the writings of Burckhardt and a few others had addressed the meaning and symbolism of sacred Islamic art; but in the Islamic world, although artisans practiced the traditional arts, there was very little exposition of the principles of sacred art for the younger generation who would have to apply these principles for themselves. It is for this reason that Nasr's work has been most influential among practicing artists, architects, calligraphers, designers, and craftsmen in many parts of the Islamic world, and largely through his influence, Burckhardt also gained appreciation there. His 1987 book *Islamic Art and Spirituality* became a bible for the study of Islamic art in Iran. Further, in Iran, the newly established Academy of the Arts grew directly out of Nasr's writings and inspiration.

Before Nasr's influence, there were essentially two classes of people trained in the arts in the Islamic world: the traditional artists and craftsmen, who were highly competent in the tradition of Islamic art but who could not express the principles behind their work in a contemporary language; and the modernist architects and painters who studied in the West or were influenced by modern Western art and whose work had a destructive effect on the traditional arts within the Islamic world. Nasr's articulation, in a contemporary language, of the meaning, symbolism, and sacred geometry in Islamic art has helped to preserve the traditional arts of the Islamic world, and his work has been maintained and furthered by his many students among the contributing artists in the Arab world, Pakistan, Turkey, and, of course, Iran. It is in large part because of Nasr's work that the modern influences of the West have not succeeded in completely supplanting traditional Islamic art and design.

Nasr has also been deeply involved in the practical defense of traditional Islamic art. In Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, with the support of the Shah and Empress of Iran, his work contributed to the preservation of the traditional structure of many Iranian towns and cities, and within them, many individual buildings. In the 1970s, Nasr organized the first conference ever held on traditional Islamic art and architecture in Iran. This conference brought significant traditional artisans and architects such as Hasan Fathi to the fore. One must also note Nasr's major role in the creation of the School of Traditional Arts of the Prince of Wales in London. This school has been greatly instrumental in the survival, growth, and dissemination of the traditional arts, and Nasr has lectured

there many times to the young architects, artists, and craftsmen, as he has in other schools in Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Malaysia, and Iran. Nasr also played a major role in the first and second Festival of the World of Islam in London. It was Nasr who introduced Titus Burckhardt to the project. For the second festival, he organized an exhibition of Islamic science at the Science Museum in London, the first of its kind, and wrote the introduction to Burckhardt's book *The Art of Islam*, which was published in conjunction with the exhibition of Islamic art at the Hayward Gallery in London that was inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth.

On an even more directly practical level, Nasr practices the principles of traditional art in his own poetry, in both English and Persian, which is an expression of his philosophical and spiritual teaching that traditional knowledge is not simply a geographic, ethnic, or historical phenomenon, but a living spiritual reality.

Sufism

Like his work in the field of Islamic art, Nasr's contribution to the study of Sufism has both a scholarly or academic side and a practical or applied side, for although many volumes have been written about Sufism through the centuries, Sufism is, principally, an applied discipline whose aim is the perfection of the soul and the purification of the heart. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss not only Nasr's work as a scholar of and spokesman for Sufism, but also his role as a Sufi teacher and spiritual guide.

Without a doubt, one of Nasr's greatest scholarly achievements has been to introduce authentic Sufism to the academic world in the West. Prior to Nasr's work in this field, there were almost no other works in Western languages that expounded Sufism in a completely scholarly language and were at the same time written from within the Sufi tradition. The works of Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin came closest, but although their work certainly had empathy for Sufism and an appreciation for the necessity of participation and practice, neither scholar was a Sufi in a tenable sense of the term. Nasr's voice is both authentically Sufi and rooted in the classical sources of Sufism in both Arabic and Persian.

Nasr's initial work on the subject, *Sufi Essays*, was the first authentically Sufi work to be accepted in the mainstream academia of the West. Numerous other books followed this seminal work, and, in its wake, Nasr has trained several generations of Western students in Sufism. Nasr's work is unique in that it presents authentic Sufism as a contemporary reality and not simply as a medieval phenomenon expressed by

Rūmī, Ibn ʿArabī, and other such classical Sufis—that is, Nasr's studies are not merely historical. Nevertheless, before Nasr's *Three Muslim Sages*, Ibn ʿArabī was hardly known in the English-speaking world, and the tremendous interest in him that has grown over the last forty years is to some extent due to Nasr's early work. Nasr's voluminous writings and lectures on Sufism have also given rise to a new generation of scholars who have taken on Nasr's mantle, including William Chittick, who is the foremost authority on Ibn ʿArabī today in America.

Equally important has been Nasr's exposition and defense of Sufism within the Islamic world, a task made necessary by the currents of modernist, fundamentalist, exclusivist, and exoteric points of view. Nasr answers these views with his exposition of the innate value of Sufism for contemporary humanity. It is this work for which Nasr's writings have become especially known within the Islamic world itself. Nasr's contribution here has been not only to present Sufism in a scholarly way, free from "new age" and fundamentalist interpretations, but also as a living practice and reality. This undertaking, in concert with the other great advocates of traditional Sufism such as Schuon, Burckhardt, Guénon, and Martin Lings, has brought significant changes to the lives of many young Muslims studying in the West, and also of Westerners who have sought a door into the spiritual world outside of modern Western culture. Within the Islamic world itself, in such places as contemporary Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, many have been led to the serious study of Sufism through Nasr's writings.

Nasr's work in both the Islamic and Western worlds has corrected two common errors about Sufism. First, it has refuted the claim that Sufism is not Islamic in origin. Nasr, along with Massignon and Annemarie Schimmel, has argued strongly against this assertion, completely settling the argument, at least in academia. The second error that Nasr has helped to correct is the idea that Sufism is a purely philosophical or metaphysical discipline and not a spiritual path. Nasr has demonstrated beyond question that Sufism's objective is spiritual realization and that its application is not simply conceptual or historical but existential, current, and immediate. In light of Nasr's work, one can live in and understand the modern world perfectly well, and at the same time espouse and practice traditional Sufism without destroying its authenticity. For example, Nasr was the very first person to write on the significance of Sufism for the environmental crisis, in an essay that is the text of a talk given in Japan in 1970, and which appears in his *Sufi Essays*. In this context, two of Nasr's works deserve particular attention: *Knowledge and the*

Sacred, which explicates the philosophical and metaphysical basis of Sufism and, indeed, of spiritual knowledge per se; and *The Garden of Truth*, which is not simply about Sufism, but is an authentic Sufi work written in the English language.

Since Sufism is not simply a philosophical discipline, but a living reality, it can only be known "from the inside" or, as the Sufis say, "by tasting." Nasr is, by nature, a teacher, and he has never shrunk from the responsibilities of teaching the practical as well as theoretical dimensions of Sufism. This task requires a number of important, and sometimes contradictory, gifts, since neither personal virtue nor doctrinal knowledge alone is sufficient for one to be an efficacious spiritual guide. The gifts required are those of orthodoxy, of understanding and accuracy of transmission; the ability not only to expound the truth, but to reach within the soul of the disciple; the ability to tailor and apply universal truths to particular cases and individual situations; the ability to be a doctor of the human soul, and a healer of the heart; and the ability to affirm and encourage the growth of the soul and manage its direction until it flows into the ocean of divine beatitude.

An authentic spiritual guide must also have the confirmation of Heaven, or *ta'yīd*, as it is known in Sufism. For Nasr the authority of this function has grown over the decades, and his purpose as a spiritual guide continues to be the central reality of his life. It is this rare combination of skills that includes both scholarly knowledge and practical experience that makes Nasr unique. Indeed, the ability to guide others on this journey requires knowledge that is both factual and existential, or doctrinal and practical, for the vocation of a spiritual guide calls for the application of the "science of the soul," which is both objective and subjective.

Relations between Religions

One of the most important contributions Nasr has made in his lengthy career is his contribution to the study of relations between religions. His achievement in this field is not the devising of a new theory or vision of the relation between religions, for the transcendent unity of religions (to use Frithjof Schuon's elegant phrase) was already expounded in a magisterial way by Schuon, and in another cadre by René Guénon. Nasr's own achievement has been to take this doctrine of the inner unity of religions and elucidate it for the first time in an academic way, so as to bring it to the attention of those who study religion

in the West. His work has taken such concepts as universalism and the transcendent unity of religion out of the realm of "popular" or "new age" literature and exposed their traditional depth and meaning with full academic rigor.

One of Nasr's key works in helping to introduce the perennialist perspective is his essay "The Perennial Philosophy and the Study of Religion," which was written for a *Festschrift* for Wilfred Cantwell Smith, at that time perhaps the most perspicacious of North American scholars of religion. Smith was a close friend of Nasr's and a colleague at Harvard, although he did not share completely the idea of the perennial philosophy. That essay also appears in Nasr's book *The Need for a Sacred Science* and was seminal in introducing many to this field. One can see the change that has been wrought through Nasr's influence by comparing the present-day place of the perspective of the perennial philosophy concerning the plurality of religions with its place forty years ago. The introduction of the perennialist perspective, along with its influence on the mainstream academic community in this field, continues to be one of Nasr's most important and enduring contributions.

This voice of perennialism in the academic study of religion was completely missing when Nasr arrived upon the scene. Prior to his arrival, most scholars of religion in universities studied religion solely against a linguistic, historical, and cultural background—the discussion was largely about who influenced whom, and the question of truth was not addressed at all. Now there is a wide discussion of the claim that there is a perennial and eternal truth that is neither purely historical, nor determined by temporal flow, nor simply a phenomenon without reference to truth. This change has made it possible to study the various religions in a way that is religiously, theologically, and metaphysically significant, rather than studying religion by removing from it that which is religious—a method that had characterized most of the study of religion in academic circles since World War II, when this field began to be popular in the general programs of Western universities and not only in divinity schools and seminaries.

Nasr's work in this domain has had a tremendous influence on scholars in the West, particularly younger scholars who are studying religion, whether they are from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or other traditions. Most notably it has influenced a number of Muslim scholars who are now faced for the first time with taking religious pluralism seriously. The more traditional societies become diluted through the influence of modernism, the more they evidence a cognizance of the presence of

other religions that have to be taken into consideration. Here Nasr's seminal influence is clearly seen among Turkish, Persian, Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Arabic writers and scholars. In the current of contemporary dialogue, for example in Iran and Turkey, where this issue is perhaps more hotly debated than in other countries, the name of Nasr is at the very center of all these debates.

This change of bringing the idea of truth to the academic study of religion—the perennialist perspective—is perhaps Nasr's greatest legacy in this field, and it is a change of enduring importance, intellectually and spiritually speaking, because it has provided the way for many a student in the field of religion to take religion seriously—and to be religious—without closing his or her mind to the reality of other religions or being unscholarly. Nasr and Huston Smith, whom Nasr brought to this perspective, have probably influenced the landscape of religious studies more than any other two people by demonstrating that one is not compelled to choose between either absolutizing one's own religion and rejecting everything else, or relativizing one's own religion by taking it as only a historical event or an interesting phenomenon without intrinsic meaning. Nasr has brought to us the perspective that the study of religion cannot be accomplished without understanding the presence of revelation and the penetration of a divine message into the human order. This mission continues to occupy Nasr's life and work.

Nasr's books continue to be so widely read and translated into so many languages that they greatly exceed the impact of any other traditional writer, with the exception perhaps of Guénon in his native France. But even in the West, Nasr's works are much better known in the United States than those of Guénon or Schuon. Nasr's body of writings now includes over 500 articles and 50 books written and edited, many of which have been translated into many languages. This corpus is certainly one of Nasr's most important legacies. But, as already mentioned, one must also look to the great number of students he has trained who themselves have produced a large number of works and trained many of their own students: scholars like William Chittick, Osman Bakar, and others who are first-rate scholars globally. Their works and the students they have trained are perhaps among the most enduring parts of Nasr's legacy.

The present work is a long interview with Nasr, consisting of two main parts: the story of his life, which is captivating in its own right, for the events that shaped him have been dramatic; and an intellectual autobiography exploring the different themes of his life's work. This book will serve well as an introduction to Seyyed Hossein Nasr for those who

are encountering his work for the first time; but also for those who are already well acquainted with his work, this book is a journey into the mind behind it, revealing the unity of the different facets of his thought. What Nasr offers us is indeed nothing new; rather he has given back to us that which we already possessed but which had slipped from our awareness. The wisdom that shines through the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr from his more than fifty books and five hundred articles is not his own; it is timeless and eternal. It shines forth from its Source and is reflected and refracted by those precious individuals who know its nature and who come in every age and time to show us its light. One of these great lenses, in our day and age, is Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Terry Moore

Part One

Childhood

R.J.: Thank you for having accepted this interview, and I would like to start this book with a series of biographical questions about your family life and your childhood years. You were born into a family of scholars and physicians in 1933. Can we start with the memories of your childhood?

Ancestors

S.H.N.: In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful.

Yes of course, with pleasure. I will be glad to say something about my childhood. I have very vivid memories of my childhood, and they have left a permanent mark upon me not only emotionally, but also intellectually. As you said, I was born into a family of scholars. From my mother's side, my grandfather and great-grandfather were famous religious scholars. My great-grandfather was one of the foremost religious scholars during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Shaykh Faḍl Allāh Nūrī,[1] my mother's grandfather, was put to death at that time, and this event left a deep imprint upon my mother's family, a kind of psychological impact from which many of them suffered. Many of them remained, of course, pious, but at the same time a number of the people in the family turned against Islam, including the head of the Iranian Communist party, Nūr al-Dīn Kianouri, who was a first cousin of my mother and a grandson of Shaykh Faḍl Allāh Nūrī. So there was both a religious inheritance, a very strong one, and also a psychological trauma which I felt from the side of my mother's family concerning religious matters. Nevertheless, the dimension of religious concern was always very much present.

As far as my father's side is concerned, he was a physician—so was his father—but my father was also a great scholar of the Persian

language and a philosopher. He was the only person, I think, in the history of modern Iran who had been dean of the Medical School, Law School, and the Faculty of Arts of Tehran University as well as being the chancellor of the Teacher's College of Iran. He was also involved in politics. He was a member of the first parliament when it was established after the Constitutional Revolution and had a hand in writing the Constitution. For that very reason his closest friends were the leading dignitaries in Iran from a political point of view, men such as Muḥammad ʻAlī Forughi[2] and Muḥtashim al-Ṣalṭanah Isfandiyārī.[3]

My childhood was marked by a combination of an intense religious and cultural upbringing and also an awareness of the political situation of the country through contact with the political elites, many of whom were well-read scholars. Not only were my mother and father very literate in the Persian language, but my father was an authority in Persian literature and my mother was also very well versed in classical Persian poetry.

Early Memories

From this early period of my life I have vivid memories of several things. First of all, nights spent, from the time that I remember, when I was three, four years old, in the reading of the Persian classics of poetry and prose, especially Saʻdī, Ḥāfiẓ, Rūmī, and Firdawsī.[4] I started with these four, and later on I studied Niẓāmī.[5] When I was just a few years old, probably eight or nine years old, one day the late Muḥammad ʻAlī Forughi came to our house, and my father said: "Mr. Forughi, why do you not compete with Hossein in exchange of verses of poetry (*mushāʻirah*)," and Forughi put me on his lap and the exchange of verses began. Finally, I beat him in the competition because I knew so many poems by heart. I knew thousands of poems at that time, including verses of other poets such as ʻAṭṭār, and that left a very important impression upon my mind later in life. In those days in Iran the old tradition of combining the social gathering of men with scholarly discussions was still alive. My father had a few close friends who were very great scholars such as Hādī Ḥāʻirī,[6] who was probably the greatest master of the *Mathnawī* of his day, and even people such as Foruzanfar[7] would go and ask him questions when they had difficulties with the *Mathnawī*, and Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim ʻAṣṣār.[8] I came to know them well at that time. My father also had other friends who were likewise, as I said, "men of letters" and at the same time political figures like Forughi. My father used to have

these "literary" sessions about once a week with them, and Shukūh al-Mulk, who was then the head of Reza Shah's[9] special bureau, came to these sessions. He was also a very close friend of my father, and we lived on the same street. My father used to take me to these sessions in which they would spend hours reading just a few verses of poetry and commenting on them and discussing them. This experience permeated deeply my mind and soul. It is an important impression of my childhood that I will always remember.

The second memory of my childhood is the combination of piety and interest in Sufism that surrounded me. My father and his father and grandfather all belonged to the Sufi tradition and espoused what is usually called the idea of "tolerance" (I use this term here even if I do not like to use the word *tolerance* because it is too weak and also inadequate a word when used in relation to other religions and worldviews), but the presence of the universality of Sufism was part of my upbringing, which was both religious and universally oriented.

The third memory concerns philosophy. I was interested in philosophical questions from the earliest age, when I was seven or eight years old. I would sit down at the feet of my father and ask him, for example, if there were to be no earth and no sky, where would we be? What would be the end of time and space? You know, questions like these. Really metaphysical questions haunted me. My mother would force me to go and play some football or something like that because I used to keep sitting at my father's feet and ask him such questions. I remember that when I was about ten years old, I read Persian translations of Maurice Maeterlinck[10] which had just appeared at that time and also some passages from Pascal[11] and Descartes.[12] It is interesting that this early philosophical interest I had was also related to Western philosophy, because my father had an excellent library of French as well as Persian books which I gave to the central library of Tehran University when I returned to Iran in the late 1950s. I could not read French at the time, although I was studying French with a tutor, but there were a lot of translations, and my father also discussed these matters with me. So when I was ten years old, I knew who Pascal was and especially I knew that the Catholic philosophers in France contrasted with the skeptical philosophers who came later on. At least I had heard of many of the French philosophers' names, and so a part of the recollection of my childhood is also intense philosophical interest.

My last memory of that period is the very rigorous mental and also moral training that I was put through by the discipline placed upon me

by my father and mother, but especially my father, who taught me how to be very precise in intellectual matters and how to be a good student. A lot of care was taken over my education, so that I became first among all students in Iran in the sixth-grade national exam, and I was always an outstanding student at school. It was ingrained in my mind that I should always be a very good student and also an upright person, and that, of course, has been the basis of all the intellectual and moral discipline I have had throughout my life.

Nasr's Father

R.J.: We will get to that part later. Let us talk for the moment about the book written by your father which is called *Dānish wa Akhlāq* ("Knowledge and Ethics").[13] Both the questions of knowledge and ethics are important concepts in your thought. I am interested to know more about this book of your father's and in which way it influenced you.

S.H.N.: First of all, my father wrote a large number of books, most of which were never published. They are still in manuscript form, and I am very sad that I gave a big iron box with the manuscripts of my father in it to Dr. Rezvani, professor of history at Tehran University, who was working on the history of the Qajar period and was going to write a book on my father. I gave him the box the year before the Revolution, and I never discovered what has happened to it. Now Dr. Rezvani is no more among us, and I do not know what has happened to those manuscripts. When I came back to Iran in 1958, I was very unhappy that my father had written so much and so little of his writings had been published. So it is I who took the manuscript of many essays, put the chapters together and gave it the title of *Dānish wa Akhlāq,* two subjects about which my father had always spoken. At that time I asked my oldest still living paternal uncle, Seyyed Ali Nasr, who was a famous writer and one of the fathers of the modern Iranian theater and who had been very close to my father, "What title do you think my father would have liked for this book?" My uncle told me that my father always emphasized these two elements of knowledge and ethics. This is why I thought that the title *Knowledge and Ethics* would be a very appropriate title.

These were the two poles, in fact, of what I remember of my father's own personality and what he cultivated in me. First of all, he was a highly ethical person. Two years before his death he was hit by a bicycle when he was walking back home, while we were at my maternal grandfather's house for lunch. He left earlier by himself, and somebody hit

him with a bicycle while driving on the sidewalk, as a result of which my father fell into a ravine, and that fall broke his pelvis bone. He should have been helped immediately, but he told the person who hit him to go away. He said because of who he was, if the authorities discovered the identity of that person, they would imprison him and cause problems for him. Therefore, he should go away. He forced this man to go away and no one ever found out who he was. After we had discovered what happened and brought my father home, the prime minister came to our house and asked my father about the accident. "We will have the whole government chase him down," said the prime minister. But my father smiled and said, "No, no. It happened as an accident." And until he died, from the consequences of that accident, he never revealed his name. He was a man of great character.

So the questions of ethics and knowledge were very important elements of my education. My father was sort of a perennial student seeking knowledge to the end of his life. He studied every night. He was in his early sixties when I was born, since he married late. He was already very prominent both culturally and politically and did not have to study, but every night he would read for hours, and so he always tried to instill in me love for knowledge.

A Pneumatic Child

But there is something more profound which I need to mention now that I have spent years and years as a philosopher thinking about the question of human types. There are several human types to which the ancient Greeks also alluded. There are people who are somatic, who are satisfied by bodily pleasures; that is what they seek in life. There are those who are *psychoi*, as it is said in Greek: these are people who are satisfied with emotional responses to states belonging to the psychic realm. And then there are people who are pneumatic: these are people whose nature is to seek knowledge because that is what makes them happy. Even if spiritual knowledge is not available to them, they go into the field of theoretical physics or philosophy and logic, although the truly pneumatic type always seeks *sophia*. That type of mind seeks knowledge and is drawn by nature to knowledge even if it not be always what Plotinus or other traditional philosophers had in mind when they spoke of knowledge. In my case, the love of knowledge was always primary even when I was a child. Even when I was a young boy, nothing really made me as happy as knowing something. My parents would buy me a new football or a new suit.

You know how little boys are. I did not say that I did not like these things. I liked them, but I was always happier to have a book. So in my case there was a kind of congruence between this nature in me and my father's ability to actualize it. Throughout my life I think I have always been after the quest of knowledge, and that goes back to my childhood days.

R.J.: That is interesting. You said that from your mother's side and father's side both your grandfathers were religious people and religious scholars, and it is interesting to see that your father had a modernist education. He gave a great deal of importance to modern education even if his father had a religious background. How do you explain this phenomenon?

Traditional and Modern Education: A Synthesis

S.H.N.: This is a very good question, a very profound question, which I have never fully discussed anywhere. Many people consider my father to be the founder of the modern educational system in Iran, and this is certainly true. People such as Dr. Ṣadīqa'lam[14] and Dr. A. Siyāsī [15] worked at the beginning of their careers under the direction of my father. He did not want to become the minister of education, although for a while he had to accept the title of the acting minister of education because the ministers changed all the time during the reign of Reza Shah, and my father wanted to preserve stability in the new educational system and that began during the Qajar period when my father was the head of the whole educational system of the country. My father ran the Iranian educational system into and through the reign of Reza Shah; so he was, in a sense, the "Father of Modern Education in Iran." What he wanted to do, however, was to integrate the modern ideas of education and also modern learning into the more traditional Islamic pattern, because he himself had had both a traditional and a modern education. There was, in my father's vision, the goal of integration of our own traditional patterns of education and modern ideas that were coming from the West, and he therefore always encouraged me to learn modern science, modern ideas in addition to Persian classics. But he did not want to have the kind of dichotomy that our culture has in fact faced since the Qajar period, as we also see in all Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which is the core problem of the 20th and now 21st centuries for Muslim countries and has not been solved by any means. And yet, the very attitude of my father towards these matters caused me a great deal of intellectual

questioning later on in life, because I was not simply a young man brought up in a purely traditional family, let us say, learning only the Quranic sciences and the ritual aspects of the religion; because while there was piety in our house, there were also modern ideas. I will not call it free thinking, but there were doors opened towards the West.

Besides the Persian classics, I read the translations of Shakespeare when I was very young. I remember the first time I read *The Merchant of Venice*, when I was ten or eleven years old. Also at that time my father gave me a book of Victor Hugo. Another of my paternal uncles had translated some works of French literature into Persian in the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, and this is part of our family heritage. I was reading everything written by Alexandre Dumas *père* and Alexandre Dumas *fils* that I could find in Persian, and, of course, my orientation, as far as the West was concerned, was completely towards the French world rather than the English world. My father, in a sense, had created a synthesis within himself between the sapiential and metaphysical aspects of the Islamic heritage, which he received through Sufism, Islamic philosophy and medicine, and Western sciences and ideas whose philosophical foundations he did not necessarily accept, because he was not a positivist, nor an agnostic, just the other way around. But he had solved the problem of the dichotomy between tradition and modernism through a metaphysical vision, as we see in one of his essays in his book *Dānish wa Akhlāq* in which he talks about darkness as a very profound symbol.

My father did not live long enough and I was not old enough for him to transfer to me this synthesis which he had created within himself. I had to search for this myself. But what he did leave with me was three things: first of all, love of knowledge for our own Persian culture, our religious, literary, philosophical tradition; secondly, an avid interest in what was going on in the West in the realm of science and philosophy, literature and everything else; thirdly, a sense of serenity that he had within himself and which I observed constantly. He always had an incredible angelic smile on his face, because he was a very serene man and one could tell there were no inner tensions and conflicts within him as we see in so many of our contemporaries whose soul is in a sense torn by the different worldviews of tradition and modernism; he was not like that.

Leaving Iran

I left Iran at the age of twelve and a half; I was then not even thirteen years old. The date was the fall of 1945, shortly after the end of the