

# **BEACON OF KNOWLEDGE: CONFERENCE IN HONOUR OF SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR**

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Beacon of Knowledge: Conference in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr was held on November 2-3, 2001 at the George Washington University, Washington DC. The conference featured eight panels, thirty-six speakers, an exhibit of calligraphy and paintings, poetry recitation, and a concert of classical Persian music. The conference drew a crowd of around two hundred people.

The Beacon of Knowledge conference was convened to honor Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his contributions to the field of Islamic and Iranian studies, perennial philosophy, and the relations between Islam and the West. In his opening remarks, Stephen J. Trachtenberg, president of the George Washington University, underlined the importance of the scholarly career of Dr. Nasr in bridging the gaps between sciences and humanities on the one hand, and Islam and the West, on the other. He also noted that the approach Dr. Nasr advocates in the fields of culture and civilization has gained a further importance in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on America.

The keynote speech of the conference was delivered by Keith Critchlow of the Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts Department (VITA) of the Prince of Wales' Foundation, London, UK. As an old friend and colleague of Dr. Nasr, Critchlow emphasized Dr. Nasr's contributions to the revival of the study of traditional arts and the establishment of the VITA while at the same time providing insights into the personal friendship of over thirty years between him and Dr. Nasr. Dr. Critchlow also made a wonderful presentation of the activities of VITA with slides and showed some remarkable examples of the works of the students studying at VITA.

The first panel of the conference was devoted to the personal testimonies of some friends and students of Dr. Nasr. N. Assar, S. Nemitz, P. Felsenthal, A. al-Hibri, D. Burrell, and M. Shirazi talked about their friendship with Dr.

Nasr, some of which go back to the 1940s and 1950s before Dr. Nasr began his graduate studies. This was certainly one of the most special and moving parts of the conference whereby the listeners, especially the younger students of Dr. Nasr, were taken back to his childhood years.

This was followed by the presentation of seven panels over two days by a number of scholars in the field of Islamic and comparative studies. The presentations were a reflection of the depth and breadth of Dr. Nasr's scholarship and hence ranged from the school of Illumination and science in the Islamic world to the perennial philosophy, Sufism, and the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Speakers included such prominent scholars as Mahdi Aminrazavi, Osman Bakar, Laleh Bakhtiyar, David Cain, William Chittick, Emma Clark, Amirah el-Zain, Ali Gheissari, Alan Godlas, Mohammad Faghfoory, Patrick Laude, Oliver Leaman, Luce Lopez-Baralt, Muhiaddin Mesbahi, Sachiko Murata, Latimah-Parwin Peerwani, Ibrahim Pourhadi, Abdallah Schleifer, Jane Smith, Mary Tucker, John Voll, Gisela Webb, and Hossein Ziai and such young scholars as Ejaz Akram, Caner Dagli, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Ibrahim Kalin, and Waleed al-Ansary. This was a real intellectual feast as the speakers opened new areas of discussion and raised a number of important questions.

Another highlight of the conference was the art exhibit by Muhammad Zakariya and Vicente Pascual. Muhammad Zakariyya put together some of his works of calligraphy, among the best to be found in the Western hemisphere, while Vicente Pascual joined him with his serene and contemplative paintings. To this should be added a poetry recitation by Peter Felsenthal, an old friend of Dr. Nasr and poet himself, with nay (flute) by I. Kalin as live background music. The art dimension of the conference reached its peak with the classical Persian music concert by the Chakawak Ensemble on Saturday evening.

Dr. Nasr's hour-long speech after the end of the panels was perhaps the most important and interesting part of the conference. In a rather uncharacteristic way, Dr. Nasr spoke about himself and his career in public for the first time, narrating his life story from his childhood years in Iran and his arrival in America to his enrolment at MIT to become a geologist and his years as a scholarly and public figure before and after the Iranian Revolution in Iran and finally in the United States. For those who have known Dr. Nasr

through his writings, classes or public appearances, this was a unique opportunity to get to know Dr. Nasr by his own words. This was followed by the presentation of a gift to Dr. Nasr by his students and the conference committee. The gift, prepared in Zanzan, Iran by a group of Persian artists, was appreciated by everyone for its stunning beauty.

Given the quality of its content and the number of attendance, this was surely a very successful conference and will be remembered for a long time. The diligent work of the conference committee composed of Mehdi Aminrazavi, Muhammad Faghfoory and I. Kalin is to be acknowledged here. To this should be added the remarkable dedication and ability of volunteers Rebekah Adkisson, Ejaz Akram, Lori Bedotto, Katie Haman, Juliane Hammer, Nuriya Garcia Masip, Fuad Naeem, Juan Polit, Zohra Zirat, and others who made this conference a real success.

There is a plan to publish the conference proceedings as a book. In the mean time, those who are interested can visit the conference website at [www.beaconofknowledge.com](http://www.beaconofknowledge.com) for the conference program, abstracts and some pictures.