

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

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ABSTRACT

“Traditional philosophies are so many expressions of the truths contained in perennial philosophy, which, being perennial, has no temporal *terminus quo*. It deals with the timeless and for that very reason is the most timely of truths.”
(Seyyed Hossein Nasr)

Dr. Nasr has been a persevering and staunch promoter of a better understanding and dialogue between the Islamic world and the West. Several years of hard work on my doctoral dissertation, devoted to the research of perennial philosophy and the views of Professor Nasr in particular, along with those of Guénon, Schuon and other perennial thinkers, brought me close to nearly five decades of the brilliant career of this truly most significant Muslim ambassador in the West. Professor S. H. Nasr is certainly the most important Muslim thinker of the second half of the 20th century and, God willing, of the first half of the 21st as well. I was happy to learn that this opinion of mine was confirmed by the prestigious Library of Living Philosophers, which included a volume entitled *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (June 2001), the only Muslim thinker among the torch-bearers of Western philosophy. In this way, the universalism of the Islamic model of thinking was incorporated on an equal footing into the world’s philosophical heritage in the most beautiful form and with the fullness of academic expression.

Kahteran: Dear Professor Nasr, I am personally privileged with this amazing possibility to make this interview with you, i.e. with someone who is— not only according to my opinion, but that of many others— one of the most remarkable philosophers of our time. Also, you succeeded in making clearer the philosophical notions of *sophia perennis* and *philosophia perennis* to the minds of today’s Muslims, minds increasingly attacked by ideologies borne out of modernism and other “-isms” that came along with it. Actually, it is but one measure of your own personal accomplishments that you have been able to attract and engage the very best philosophical minds of our

times in the Foundation for Traditional Studies and the journal *Sophia* and its publications over the last fifteen years or so. So could you, please, tell us your own definition of traditional philosophy after dealing with its contents in different fields of your investigations and intellectual deliberations?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: To respond to your question I must first say a word about the *philosophia perennis*. Traditional thinkers like myself believe that there is a perennial and also universal wisdom to be found within the integral traditions that have guided humanity over the ages, traditions such as the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and Neo-Confucian, Egyptian, ancient Greek, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Islamic, not to speak of the primal and mythological traditions in which this wisdom has not been usually formulated explicitly in conceptual schemes. At the heart of this wisdom lies pure metaphysics to which I have referred as *scientia sacra* and about which I have written extensively especially in my book *Knowledge and the Sacred* in the chapter bearing that name as its title.

Now, traditional philosophy may be said to be a philosophy, in the time-honored and traditional sense of the term as understood by the likes of Pythagoras, Parmenides and Plato, that speaks in the language of the particular Tradition in which it has grown and flourished but it contains at its heart the basic universal truths of *scientia sacra* or some aspect of it. Moreover, since it can deal with only certain aspects of that truth and be based on a perspective from a particular angle of vision, on the formal level it may on occasion seem to be opposed to another school of traditional philosophy belonging even to the same tradition as one sees in Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism in Greek civilization. These philosophies differ from each other on a certain level but are all based on the reality of the Supreme Principle which none of them deny even if each points to It in a different way, whether it be the Supreme Good, *Agathon*, the Unmoved Mover or the One. However, those Greek schools of philosophy that are not based on the Supreme Principle, such as Skepticism, Epicureanism and the like are not called traditional philosophy.

Furthermore, it should be evident that we understand by philosophy not what is understood by it in modern European and American philosophy but that which is understood by the traditional philosophers. Otherwise, we would not refer to *mashsha'ī* and *ishraqī* schools of philosophy in Islam, the

Samkhya and Vedanta in Hinduism, Neo-Confucianism and Taoism in the Far East, or Thomism and Christian Platonism in the West as philosophy. It is to make this distinction clear that Guénon attacks “philosophy” as currently understood and speaks instead of metaphysics, cosmology, etc. when referring to traditional philosophy. Coomaraswamy and Schuon have also made this distinction clear in several of their writings.

Finally, it is necessary to recall that for us metaphysics in the sense of *scientia sacra* is not a branch of philosophy, but that traditional philosophies are so many applications of metaphysical principles to various domains from the cosmos to man, from religion to art, from the reality of the human person to human society. Nor do all traditional philosophies reflect the metaphysical principles directly to the same degree. Rather, there is often a hierarchy in the degree of clarification and crystallization of concepts pertaining to the Supreme Science. A clear example of this hierarchization is to be seen in the six Hindu *darshans*, usually translated as the six schools of Hindu philosophy, and also in Islamic philosophy when seen from the perspective of Mullā Sadrā’s *al-hikmat al-muta‘aliyah*, often translated as “the transcendent theosophy” to distinguish it not only from philosophy in its modern connotation but also from Peripatetic philosophy, which, although still traditional philosophy, over-systemized and rationalized metaphysical teachings, laying the foundation for the rationalism that was to appear later especially in the post-medieval period in the West.

Kahteran: In the meantime, I have personally become acquainted with the great achievements of the Foundation, and I have to ask you, Professor Nasr, how this kind of philosophy is applicable to our modern philosophical curricula, or which kind of intellectual and practical benefit we should expect after its introduction into our university programs?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Today in the West and even in many non-Western universities the only philosophy that is taught is the modern and now the post-modern. Traditional philosophies are either ignored or relegated to the realm of intellectual history. For the non-Western part of the world (and even to some extent for the West), introduction of the traditional philosophies associated with the world in question means first of all the recovery of one’s own intellectual tradition and a deeper understanding of the more intellectual dimensions of one’s own traditional culture. The

teaching of such philosophies also provides the means of looking critically at the waves of Western thought that inundate those far-away shores of the non-Western worlds, often with the violence of a stormy sea and this in turn prevents the thinkers of those worlds from being simply blind imitators of Western thought, turning at best into second-rate Western thinkers with non-Western names.

For both the Western and non-Western worlds, such philosophies also re-introduce the importance of vision and the search for truth, goodness and beauty into the barren landscape of present-day currents of Western thought. How many Western philosophers from Heidegger to Rorty have spoken of the end of philosophy? What is now ending is not, however, the traditional philosophies, but the anti-traditional philosophies that began to flourish in the West from the Renaissance onward and have now spread to other parts of the world even while having reached an impasse in the West itself. Traditional philosophies are so many expressions of the truths contained in perennial philosophy, which, being perennial, has no temporal *terminus quo*. It deals with the timeless and for that very reason is the most timely of truths. Its principles can also be applied to new problems that humanity faces today, from the environmental crisis to the present-day economic upheaval caused by the forgetting of those principles.

Kahteran: For me personally, it is really interesting to put to you the question about one of such giants of spirit, the late professor Toshihiko Izutsu, with whom you collaborated closely during his life. I am personally grateful and intellectually indebted to you both for your enormous scholarly output which enabled me to approach the philosophical traditions of the East without reluctance of any kind. Moreover, my contact with other traditions made it possible for the universalist Islamic perspective to come into full swing and reach above the formal frameworks of various philosophical, theological, and cultural patterns. So, to make it quite clear: is it possible to draw comparisons between Japanese philosophical traditions and especially Sufism *stricto sensu* following in the footsteps of Izutsu?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: It might be of interest to your readers and to yourself for me to say a few words about my relation with Izutsu and the role of this relationship in Izutsu's intellectual activities in the later phase of his life. In 1962 I was a visiting professor at Harvard University. At that time Izutsu was a professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University

in Montreal, Canada. The head of the Institute at that time was the famous Canadian theologian and historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith who was my close friend and who later came to Harvard. Smith invited me to give a lecture at McGill. I accepted the offer and on a very cold winter day went to Montreal. Smith told me that Izutsu was there and giving a lecture in the afternoon. I had already known his fine studies on Quranic semantics and so I went to the lecture whose theme was the relation between language and meaning with a special reference to Jean-Paul Sartre. Izutsu was a remarkable linguist, master of not only classical Chinese and Japanese but also knowledgeable in Greek, Latin and many other European languages as well as Sanskrit. Besides, he was a remarkable scholar of Arabic and could also read Persian. It was, therefore, natural that his interest in the traditional schools of thought should have been focused on semantics. But he was also a metaphysician and philosopher, as his later works would demonstrate amply.

My lecture at McGill, which he attended, was about the philosophy of Mullā Sadrā. When the lecture finished, he came forward and said, “What you have discussed today is so significant that I want to devote the rest of my life to the Islamic *bikmat* tradition and change the whole direction of my research and writing. Henceforth I shall not be writing on semantics any more.” This is in fact what happened. We immediately became friends. He persuaded Iwanami, the famous Japanese publisher, to bring out my *Three Muslim Sages* in Japanese. In 1970 when I visited Japan, I visited his home in Kamakura and we went together to visit the great Buddha statue in the middle of a park in that city, both wearing kimonos, I wearing one of his. He kept smiling and when I asked him why, he said because everyone is giving me a strange look asking with their eyes, “Who is this person with you who does not look Japanese but is wearing the completely traditional Japanese dress?” Later I took him to the International Congress of Medieval Philosophy in Madrid, this being the first time that he attended this Congress. It was also his first visit to Spain. During the first dinner that we were having together, I ordered food in my broken Spanish. He said that he did not know any Spanish but if I were to bring him again to dinner four days later, that is, during the last day of the Congress, he would order his own food in Spanish. And that is exactly what he did.

As you know, I have always been critical of shallow comparative studies of philosophy in which some Oriental philosopher is compared to a modern European philosopher without consideration of the radical difference between the bases of traditional philosophies on the one hand and of modern philosophies on the other. Already by the early 70's I had written sharp criticisms of such comparative studies, and Izutsu had read my works on this subject. As a result of colonialism, non-Western cultures came to have much more contact with the West than with each other. A Japanese scholar of comparative philosophy would compare some Buddhist thinker with Kant, an Arab or Persian scholar Ibn Sinā with Descartes, etc. The extremely fecund and important fields of comparative traditional philosophies had received little attention especially when it came to let us say Hindu or Neo-Confucian philosophies and the Islamic philosophy and doctrinal Sufism or gnosis. How many serious studies can you name that compare in depth Sankara and Ibn 'Arabī or the Samkhya and Islamic cosmology? You can count the number of such studies on the fingers of your two hands. As for a relation between Islamic thought and Neo-Confucianism, it is a newly discovered continent now being studied in depth for the first time in a European language especially by Sachiko Murata, William Chittick and Tu Wei-Ming. In this latter effort there is also the indirect presence of Izutsu for when Izutsu was in Tehran I introduced two of my best students, Murata and Chittick, to him and urged them to study with him. They learned much from Izutsu that has helped them in their collaborations with Tu Wei-Ming in recent years.

In any case I found in Izutsu the ideal person to deal with comparative studies of traditional philosophies especially those of Islam and the Far East and I constantly pushed him in this direction. When I established the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy in Tehran in 1973, I invited Izutsu to join us on a full-time basis. He accepted and spent the academic year with us every year until the Islamic Revolution. During those years he wrote seminal works on both Islamic philosophy and comparative philosophy as well as taught both Far Eastern philosophy and Ibn 'Arabī at the Academy. When archeological excavations unearthed an ancient manuscript of the Tao Te-Ching, a text that I have always loved, Izutsu invited me to work with him on the translation into Persian of this newly discovered version of the sacred text of Taoism. I accepted the invitation and we proceeded on this

remarkable task together. He would translate the Chinese text into English and I would render the English into Persian. Finally, I would read the Persian translation and he would compare it with the Chinese and make final suggestions. We finished the text in 1978 and I decided to go over the translation one more time and to add the necessary commentaries before sending it for publication. As a result of the Revolution this task was never completed but although my library was plundered and my writings in manuscript form lost, fortunately this text survived because when in January of 1979 I set out to inaugurate a major exhibition of Persian art in Tokyo without returning to Tehran until today, I put it in my handbag to work on it on the plane. Thirty years have passed since that time but I have not turned to that task. Perhaps God will give me the strength to do so in the future. I have still not lost hope in completing a work which, if published, would perhaps be the last posthumous opus of Izutsu to be published.

What I have said about Izutsu should answer the last part of your question. The works of Izutsu, especially his major opus on Sufism and Taoism, demonstrate, along with more recent works such as those of Murata, Chittick and Tu Wei-Ming, the possibility of the deepest and most fruitful comparative study of Islamic and Far Eastern thought. Although these works concern Chinese rather than Japanese thought, there is no doubt that the same types of comparative study of Islamic and Japanese schools of thought can be carried out. To turn more specifically to Sufism, it needs to be stated that it is the esoterism of the last plenar revelation of the present history of humanity, that is, Islam, and contains, therefore, in synthetic fashion, all the different esoteric possibilities within itself. There are currents in Sufism corresponding to Zen and Shingon, others to Jodo-Shin and yet others to Japanese Neo-Confucianism. One can hope that such studies will be undertaken extensively in the future in the footsteps and following the pioneering work of Izutsu.

Kahteran: Just a few words about the very future of traditional wisdom and that type of thinking in this miserable world of differentiation in so many spheres today? Shall we see in the very near future a broadening of these investigations world-wide, or the falling into new divisions, and where is the place of Islamic philosophical heritage in this matter? Can we push aside at least for now that tunnel-vision and intellectual myopia of the proponents of the so-called U-turned Islam, which, according to my own insights, is only a

deviation of that religion and its great cultural heritage? This is an extremely important question for all of us today, because we really have to find that very needed measure of balance in the interpretation of our own traditions while we have this kind of experience of living in a society where multiculturalism is the norm, which is actually our old way of living, especially in Bosnia, the norm that is to be found in our forgotten Bosnian wisdom.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: The interest in perennial philosophy and what you call traditional wisdom continues to grow in the West as well as in a number of Islamic countries such as Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and your own Bosnia. And all of this is being carried out in the middle of an even more intensified storm with devastating consequence brought about by modernism and post-modernism on the one hand and the so-called fundamentalism on the other. The perennial philosophy is the most potent antidote to these maladies.

As for Islamic philosophy, it is now becoming better known in the West in its integral form, and not only as a chapter of the history of Western philosophy, while its significance as a major expression of the perennial philosophy is also being recognized to a greater degree than before. For those of us who have been given the gift by Heaven to understand tradition and the perennial philosophy and to live by their teachings, what is important is to cling to their truths no matter how trying the times, knowing in our heart that no matter what appearances may signal, ultimately the Truth shall triumph and prevail. As for Bosnia, to live within the worldview of tradition and perennialism is also to defend the traditional Bosnian society within whose bosom different religions and cultures lived in peace and harmony for such a long time.

Kahteran: As we confront more and more the pressing needs for a global dialogue today, is global or world philosophy a realizable project or not?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: To be sure there is need of a global dialogue but not one based on destroying the rich diversity of human cultures in the name of and in conjunction with a quantitative and materialistic economic globalization. If we are to avoid very dangerous pseudo-religions and philosophies that make global claims in the climate of today's world, we must be able to formulate a global and universal expression of perennial

philosophy which is itself the only legitimate world philosophy. I am of course all in favor of that understanding of world philosophy as found in the writings of Guénon, Coomaraswamy, Schuon and on another level Elémire Zolla, Henry Corbin, Izutsu and several other major scholars. Such an understanding is not based on the rejection of traditional forms of wisdom but on reaching the truth that they hold in common in their inner depths without the discovery of this truth— which is truly global and universal—destroying in any way the precious forms of traditional wisdom existing in particular cultures and societies. I have always been a proponent of world philosophy in this sense while standing completely opposed to those so-called world philosophies that consider traditional wisdom to be but a relic of the past and claim for themselves a future that seems to be related more to the reign of the Anti-Christ than the coming of a celestial savior such as the Mahdi, Christ in his second coming, the Kali avatar, etc.

Kahteran: Your wide-ranging work is well known to us and obviously will enhance studies in this field. Professor Nasr, you are recognized in the world as the most determined and the loudest advocate and defender of the Holy at a time that is characterized by a philosophy which is anti-metaphysical in spirit and character. So, what do you think about the very idea of finding and recollecting the philosophical resources scattered through Eastern intellectual history prior to the arrival of modern Western philosophy, resources which have yet to be recognized as part of a fuller history of philosophy?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: I am certainly favorable towards this project which is, however, too immense to be realized immediately. It would be more feasible to start with a project such as the Western Spirituality Series, published in the United States by the Paulist Press and consisting of sixty books devoted to Christian (40), Jewish (10) and Islamic (10) mystical traditions. For this project one could have an editorial board consisting of specialists on Greek, Hindu, Buddhist, Far Eastern, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophical traditions (as well as others). They could then prepare a list of the most important philosophical texts in consultation with other scholars and then bring out a series of these texts that would include translation, explanation and commentary, historical introduction, etc. Since obviously more work has been done on Western thought than on Eastern schools of philosophy in European languages, perhaps, one could begin by

including only the Eastern traditions which here must definitely include the Islamic despite the link between Islamic philosophy and Greek philosophy on the one hand and Western philosophy from the medieval period onward, on the other. Parallel with such efforts an attempt should be made to write an extensive history of traditional philosophies in a really inclusive manner without adopting 19th century European historicism and historical relativism that stand completely opposed to traditional philosophies that are based on a very different understanding of the unfolding of time.