

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*. Edited by Mehdi Amin Razavi. (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996). Pp. xv, 375.

Collected in this volume are 24 previously-published articles and essays by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. These are not mere reprints of the original articles, for some have been translated from Persian or French, and others have undergone some minor editorial changes.

The collection is divided into six parts. The first, “Islamic Thought and Persian Culture,” contains four articles that serve as an introduction to the remaining articles. Two of these deal with the relation between the culture of pre-Islamic Iran and that of the Islamized Iran which followed. The third article is an exposition of Nasr’s own ideas and beliefs with respect to the Islamic tradition in Iran and will be discussed in more detail below. The remaining article in this part deals with the use of Persian rather than Arabic in some Islamic philosophical writing.

Part II, on early Islamic philosophy, contains articles on al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, Nasir-i Khusraw and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Three articles on Suhrawardi and the Ishraqi School make up Part III. Part IV contains essays on various poets, philosophers, and scientists who lived in the period after al-Suhrawardi, such as ‘Umar Khayyam, Hakim Nizami Ganjawi, Afdal al-Din Kashani, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Qutb al-Din Shirazi, and Rashid al-Din Fadlallah. Part V is devoted to the Safavid period with articles on the School of Isfahan, Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) and Hajji Mulla Hadi Sabziwari. The sixth and final part, on Islamic thought in modern Iran, contains a single article surveying the philosophical activity in Iran in the fifties and sixties of this century.

What ties all of these articles together is Nasr’s own philosophical viewpoint and the conception he has of the nature of the Islamic tradition. Nasr is an adherent of what has been called the perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*, *sophia perennis*), known in Arabic as *ḥikmah* and in Persian as *ḥikmat* and *jāwīdān khirad*. In the modern West this philosophy has been espoused by such writers as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and, of course, Aldous Huxley (although Nasr does not refer to him).

The perennial philosophy is not a philosophy in the modern Western sense, since it is not based on reason and sense perception but rather on a different source of knowledge which Nasr variously designates by such terms as intuition, intellection, gnosis or, in Arabic, *‘irfān*, *ma‘rifah*, and *dhawq*. As the editor of this collection, Mehdi Amin Razavi, points out in his introduction, the aim of philosophy for Nasr is “unveiling the truth, which for him is God. Philosophy therefore becomes a quest for Divine Wisdom, or what Nasr calls ‘theosophia’, the rightful activity of the intellect and not the merely rational activity of a discursive nature” (p. x).

It is Nasr’s contention that the Islamic intellectual tradition is a manifestation of this perennial philosophy and that the Islamic writers within this tradition can be properly understood only in terms of this philosophy. Other manifestations of the perennial philosophy can be found in such traditions as the Hindu tradition in India or the Christian tradition of medieval Europe. In fact, Nasr uses the term “tradition” to refer only to those traditions that have a divine origin and are manifestations in some sense of this perennial philosophy.

In one of his Gifford lectures entitled “What is Tradition?” Nasr explained his use of this term. “Tradition,” he said, “as used in its technical sense in this work, as in all our other writings, means truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatāras*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.” Tradition, he says, “is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science and the arts.” It cannot be divorced from “that perennial wisdom which lies at the heart of every religion and which is none other than the Sophia whose possession the sapiential perspective in the West as well as the Orient has considered as the crowning achievement of human life. This eternal wisdom . . . which constitutes one of the main components of the concept of tradition is none other than the *sophia perennis* of the Western tradition, which the Hindus call the *sanatāna dharma* and the Muslims *al-ḥikmat al-khālīdah* (or *jāvīdān khīrad* in Persian)” (See Nasr’s *Knowledge and the Sacred*, SUNY Press, 1989, pp. 67- 68).

Nasr has more to say about tradition and in particular the Islamic philosophical tradition in his essay “The Tradition of Islamic Philosophy in Persia and its Significance for the Modern World” to be found in Part I of the collection. This essay was originally written in Persian and addressed to Persians. In it Nasr points out that the Islamic philosophical tradition is first of all a tradition that contains theosophical and gnostic elements in addition to its logical and rational elements. He says that Islamic philosophy “cannot be learned but must be ‘realized’. Philosophy in the East is not just a school of thought and an academic discipline; it is also something that must be combined with a ‘wayfaring’, and an inner transformation of man’s being. In other words, as first taught, most of all by Suhrawardi, in Islam becoming a philosopher (*faylasūf*) or traditional theosopher (*ḥakīm*) is joined to the attainment of spiritual and moral perfection” (p. 38). It is a tradition, he says, that has “synthesized reason (*istidlāl*), with all of its most precise requirements and conditions, and illumination (*ishrāq*) and intuition (*dhawq*)” (p. 41).

The Islamic philosophical tradition is also, Nasr says, a tradition which has continued to live until the present day especially in Iran. Suhrawardi and Ibn Sina “and other Islamic philosophers are alive and belong to the present moment of the life of Persians and other Muslims in general, for whom the Islamic intellectual tradition is alive” (p. 31). Unfortunately most Western scholars of Islam have not appreciated this fact and “in their studies and analyses of Islamic civilization . . . have until recently cut off their discussions with the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. In most cultural studies and those dealing with intellectual history all the later phases of Islamic philosophy, Sufism and theology as well as astronomy, mathematics and medicine are neglected almost systematically.” Even some Arab nationalists, he says, have adopted this Western view “in order to show that Islamic civilization declined when the Persians and Turks were dominant” (p. 35).

In fact, says Nasr, “because of the great influence that Western writings exercise on modern Muslims, ”this neglect on the part of Western scholars to study the later develop-

ment of the Islamic philosophical tradition "has harmed the Muslims and particularly the Persians themselves, for in reality Iran has always been the principal homeland of Islamic philosophy and it was mostly here that the tradition of Islamic philosophy continued after the 6th/12th century" (p. 32).

A third characteristic of the Islamic philosophical tradition is its universality. It has, Nasr says, "never been limited to a particular subject, people, or location, but has always been concerned with the highest truths of an unlimited nature as well as with mankind and the world as a whole" (p.42). Moreover, he says, "among classical civilizations it is only the Islamic that truly possesses an international and world-wide foundation, for this foundation came into being from the encounter of Chinese, Persian and Indian, Greek and Alexandrian elements as well as the intellectual heritages of most of the other ancient civilizations of the world along with, of course, the Quranic sciences and branches of knowledge themselves" (p. 38).

Mehdi Amin Razavi has done a very commendable job in collecting and editing these articles and making them available in one volume. They should prove of interest not only to scholars in the field of Islamic philosophy but to all those who are trying to understand events in the Islamic world and more particularly in Iran during the second half of this century.

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