

Knowledge and the Sacred

*Reflections on Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Gifford Lectures*¹

by

Gai Eaton

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983).
© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

Since 1888 the Gifford Lectureship at Edinburgh University has provided a platform for many of the world's most distinguished and original thinkers, among them Bergson, William James, Frazer, Eddington, Whitehead, Schweitzer and Sherrington. The roll-call includes theologians, philosophers and scientists who have had a profound influence on human thought over almost a century, and to be invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures is a singular honor. In 1981 this invitation was issued for the first time to a Muslim: Seyyed Hossein Nasr of Temple University, Philadelphia.

It is rare in our time to find a scholar and thinker whose work is not confined to some narrow area of specialization. Dr Nasr, however, is at home in many different fields of knowledge in accordance with the unifying perspective of Islam. There are many people, both academics and non-academic readers, who consider that—with Frithjof Schuon's *Understanding Islam*—his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* is the most effective and comprehensive exposition of the religion available to the Western world, but it is perhaps as an exponent of Sufi doctrine that he is best known. His work in this field has been an invaluable corrective to many errors and misrepresentations current in Europe and the United States. No less important and no less illuminating are his studies of the traditional Islamic sciences, particularly cosmology. Far from treating these sciences as though they were immature attempts to achieve what modern Western science has achieved, he has asserted, forcefully and uncompromisingly, their right to be considered as valid forms of knowledge and authentic paths of approach to Reality. He has done so on the basis of a wide knowledge of the secular sciences, having graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and gained his PhD from Harvard University, where he studied the History of Science and Learning.

It seems therefore particularly appropriate that he should have been invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures, since their theme is defined as “the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term—in other words, the knowledge of God”. It is with “the knowledge of God”

1. *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Edinburgh University Press. 341 pp. £11).

that he has been concerned in the fifteen books previously published in European languages, indeed this has been the unifying principle of his work over the past twenty years.

The perspective which has shaped all his work is one which is usually described as “traditionalist”—using this term in rather a special sense—and which may be said to have surfaced in the Western world sixty years ago when the French writer René Guénon published his first book. Guénon’s seminal influence is apparent in the work of a group of contemporary writers which includes Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Leo Shaya and Marco Pallis as well as Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Introducing a collection of their work in the United States,² Jacob Needleman wrote “I felt an extraordinary intellectual force radiating through their intricate prose. These men were out for the kill. For them, the study of spiritual traditions was a sword with which to destroy the illusions of contemporary man.... They seemed to take metaphysical ideas more seriously than one might have thought possible. It was as though, for them, such ideas were the most real things in the world”. Dr. Needleman’s phrase “out for the kill” is well chosen, for these men have taken on the entire Western intellectual establishment, neither seeking nor giving any quarter.

The term “tradition” as it is used here is virtually synonymous with *sophia perennis*, the “perennial philosophy”, but with the emphasis upon the actual transmission from generation to generation of the eternal truth together with the forms in which it has been clothed, the truth by which—as Dr. Nasr says in this published and expanded version of his Gifford lectures—“human beings have lived during most—or rather, nearly all—their terrestrial history”. He himself defines “tradition” as “truths or principles of a divine origin, revealed or unveiled to mankind... through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatars*, 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 of its attainment”.

He adds that “tradition is inextricably linked to revelation and religion to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth....” The contrast between “tradition” and all purely “human” wisdom, including what has passed in the West as “philosophy” from Descartes to Wittgenstein, is obvious. They have no common ground nor any meeting point.

Moreover, from the Islamic point of view, it may be said that the repeated divine revelations brought by successive messengers have been necessitated by the fact that, with the passage of time, traditions decay or are adulterated by human bias so that renewal becomes essential; and only God can renew the perennial wisdom.

Dr. Nasr reminds us that Islam regards the Doctrine of Unity (*Tawhīd*) not only as the essence of its own message but as the very heart of every authentic religion, though often veiled

2. *The Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman (Penguin Books Inc. Baltimore, 1974).

by a multiplicity of symbols. In this context he suggests that *ad-Dīn* might be the most apt term for what he understands by “tradition”, and he remarks that this term is inseparable from the idea of a wisdom that is permanent and perpetual, a “knowledge” that Sadr ad-Din Shirazi identified with a perennial wisdom which has existed from the beginning of man’s history on earth. This cannot be separated from the concept of the Sacred: “Tradition extends the presence of the Sacred into a whole world...” and it guarantees “the perpetuation of a particular spiritual perfume and sacred presence”. To live in a traditional world and in the “mould” which it provides for human destinies and human effort is “to breathe in a universe in which man is related to a reality beyond himself from which he receives those principles, truths, forms, attitudes and other elements which determine the very texture of human existence”.

Those who adopt the traditional perspective and employ it as a sword of discrimination are frequently accused of being opposed to almost everything that modern civilization values most highly and to many of the principles which are accepted as axiomatic by contemporary thinkers. The simple fact is that—examined in the light of “tradition”—both this civilization and these principles are aberrant; they represent a straying into error and illusion, rooted in the shifting ground of individual opinion and therefore lacking authenticity; “They do but guess” says the Quran, anticipating just such an age as this. “In opposing modernism in principle and in a categorical manner”, says Dr. Nasr, “those who follow the traditional point of view wish only to enable Western man to join the rest of the human race.”

These published lectures cover a wide field and might perhaps be described as *a Summa* of the “traditional” perspective as it relates to the modern “desacralization” of knowledge, the rediscovery of the Sacred, *Scientia sacra*, man as *khalifatullāh* contrasted with man as usurper, the cosmos regarded as a theophany, eternity and the temporal order, traditional art, the “multiplicity of sacred forms” and, finally, knowledge of the Sacred as the path to “deliverance”. These topics may not immediately seize the interest of the “man in the street” or even of those Muslims and Christians who feel no need to deepen their understanding of religion, but the fact remains that, in the modern age as never before, faith without intellectual foundations and without understanding is a fragile bloom.

In the East, says Dr. Nasr, “to *know* has meant ultimately to be transformed by the very process of knowing”; this view of the true function of knowledge was certainly not unfamiliar to the West in earlier times, but it was, as he says, overcome by the post-medieval process of secularization and by a “humanism” that eventually “forced the separation of knowing from being and intelligence from the Sacred”. It is possible for knowledge to attain to the Sacred both beyond the subject which knows (in terms of the transcendent object) and at the very heart of the subject himself (in terms of immanence): “The Ultimate Reality which *is* the Sacred as such is both the Knower and the Known, inner consciousness and outer reality....”

Sacred knowledge has become inaccessible and even meaningless in the modern world through “the reduction of Intellect to reason and the limitation of intelligence to cunning and

cleverness”, indeed the very notion of “Intellect” in the scholastic sense of the term, that is to say as a universal faculty which is within the individual yet transcends his individuality, has been lost to modern philosophy. Knowledge, robbed of its essentially sacred character, has become the servant of a profane “science” which undertakes to study “even the most sacred doctrines and forms at the heart of religion” and to do so without even the possibility of understanding the object of its study (since this relates to an altogether different dimension to the one in which it operates). Hence the neglect and forgetfulness of “the sapiential dimension within various traditions”. Dr. Nasr points out that, despite the “anti-intellectual voluntarism” particularly associated with the Ash‘arites, the content of the Islamic message remains wed to the sapiential perspective and the primacy of Knowledge; the *Shahādah* is a statement concerning knowledge, not sentiments or will. Islam tells us what we should know before it tells us what we should love and what we should do.

What the post-Renaissance West came to call the “Greek miracle” (a “miracle” which Islam had earlier surveyed with a more skeptical eye) was, says the author, a “miracle in reverse” from the traditional point of view in that it “substituted reason for Intellect and sensuous knowledge for inner illumination”. In this way the ancient Greeks may be said to have initiated the process of desacralization of knowledge, a process culminating in Descartes, by whose time only the transient “ego” was acceptable as an organ of knowledge, both Intellect and Revelation being excluded as possible means to the knowledge of the Real. “Knowing thus became depleted of its sacred content”, he says, “to the extent that anything that partakes of reality *can* become divorced from the Sacred. But to the mentality of those who were caught in the web of the newly established rationalism, this most intelligent way of being unintelligent, knowledge and science were totally separated from the Sacred”. One of the most curious aspects of the contemporary mentality is the misuse of the God-given faculty of intelligence to uphold, develop and defend points of view (or theories) which are inherently unintelligent in that they relate to partial truths which effectively exclude Truth as such.

Dr. Nasr points out that the “loss of the sense of permanence” in schools of philosophy in the mainstream of Western thought characterizes an advanced stage, not only in the desacralization of knowledge, but also in the withering away of any personal sense of the Sacred; hence the construction of philosophical systems which can only be called “monstrous” and which have been aptly described by the German scholar H. Türck as “misosophies”, that is to say systems based upon a hatred of wisdom rather than upon the “love of wisdom” (which is the definition of “philosophy” as such). “Cut off from the heart, which is the seat of Intellect”, he says, “reason could not but become engrossed in transience and change, which then began to usurp the function and the role of the permanent”.

The unifying vision which, in the past, related knowledge directly to love and to faith, related science to religion and so on, has finally been lost in the modern age, leaving us stranded in a “world of compartmentalization” in which there is no “wholeness” because “holiness has ceased

to be of central concern” or is, at best, reduced to sentimentality. To describe this condition one would need to find a word suggesting the precise antithesis to *Tawhīd* and, since no such term exists in Arabic, the word “fragmentation” will have to serve, bearing in mind the fact that the fragmentation of the outward, perceived world implies a corresponding fragmentation of the human soul.

The attempts made in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe to find—or to rediscover—“tradition” and, with it, the sense of “wholeness” which men possessed in the past, often took strange forms, including the amalgamation of occultist ideas with obsolescent scientific theories current at the time. There was a sincere desire, among people who realized that something inestimably precious had been lost, to “reconcile” religion and science, but the scientific theories to which they tried to bend traditional religion had been superseded by equally short-lived theories before their work was done. These rather clumsy attempts to rediscover the human heritage provide, as Dr. Nasr says, “a background for the understanding of the significance of the appearance of authentic traditional teachings in the West during the early decades of this century”.

In contrast to their predecessors, he points out, these twentieth century representatives of the traditional perspective “possessed full knowledge of traditional teachings and were intellectually prepared to implant the tree of tradition upon the soil of the Western world”. He compares the publication in 1921 of Guénon’s first book to “a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality”. Guénon died in 1951 (honored by the Egyptian Government, to their lasting credit), and “the task of the completion of the revival and exposition of traditional teachings in the contemporary world was to be carried out by Frithjof Schuon, whose works crown the body of contemporary traditional writings”. Schuon, he says, “seems to be endowed with the intellectual power to penetrate into the heart and essence of all things, and especially religious universes of form and meaning which he has clarified in an unparalleled fashion as if he were bestowed with that divine gift to which the Quranic revelation refers as the “language of birds”. It was no doubt this astonishing capacity for “clarifying” the essential message present in each of the great religions that led a Roman Catholic priest, discussing one of Schuon’s books, to remark that it had “a fullness of light which we have no right to find in the twentieth century, or perhaps in any century”.

One looks in vain for any glimmer of this light—the light of “tradition”—in Western philosophy over the past three centuries or longer, and Dr. Nasr draws attention to the fact that it has been, on the whole, modern theologians and philosophers, rather than professional scientists, who have given way to all the illusions of “scientism”, which might be defined as the whole body of thought and speculation constructed upon the working theories whereby scientists attempt to coordinate their observations and to explain rationally a phenomenal world to which they do not possess the key. It is, he says, paradoxical that theologians in particular should be so

unwilling to grasp the significance of the work of a number of outstanding scientists who have sought “to go beyond the scientific reductionism that has played such a role in the desacralization of nature and of knowledge itself”.

“No matter how deeply the heart of matter is pierced”, he adds, “there is seen order and intelligibility, which demonstrates the penetration of intelligence into the very heart of what is called material manifestation...” The cosmos, since it is not man-made but derives from the source of the Sacred as such, appears “dark” or even incoherent to modern man only because of the “veil of opacity” which surrounds “that particular humanity called modern”. The darkness is in us, not in nature, and a particularly significant aspect of this willful blindness is the reduction of the supreme “sacred science”, metaphysics, to mere mental activity, so that the trivialities of human speculation have usurped the place once occupied by an essentially spiritual activity concerned with the nature of ultimate Reality and “wed to methods for the realization of this knowledge”, a true “science of the Real” which embraced the whole of man’s being.

In the lecture entitled *Scientia Sacra* (which he defines as “that sacred knowledge which lies at the heart of every revelation”) Dr. Nasr makes a statement which offers a key to his whole perspective. “The Divine Nature or Ultimate Reality”, he says, “is both infinite and good, therefore wills to radiate and manifest Itself. From this radiation issue the states of existence, the multiple worlds, hence separation, elongation from the Source, from which results what manifests itself as evil on a particular plane of reality. To speak of Infinity is to speak of the possibility of the negation of the Source in the direction of nothingness, hence of evil which one might call the ‘crystallization or existentiation of nothingness’. Since only God—who is both Beyond-Being and Being—is Good... all that is other than God partakes of that element of privation which is the source of evil.” He speaks of “two levels of operation of the Divine Will”, the one relating to the absolute and infinite Reality which cannot but create, radiate and, as it were, overflow, hence states of separation and privation; the other relating to the Will of Being (here contrasted with “Beyond-Being”) which opposes the presence of evil in accordance with “the divine laws and norms which constitute the ethical structures of various traditional worlds”. This distinction will be familiar to students of Sufi doctrine as also, in the Christian context, to those who are familiar with the distinction made by Eckhart between Godhead and God.

Returning to the theme of sacred knowledge as such, the author refers to the “ultimately unbridgeable gulf” between intelligence sanctified by Revelation and intelligence cut off from this source (and therefore from its own root), the “fragmented faculty” which is the only type of intelligence recognized in contemporary science and philosophy. In the context of understanding the sacred Scriptures he adds that, “once intellectual intuition has become inoperative and the mind a frozen lake over which ideas glide but into which nothing penetrates, then the revealed text also veils its inner dimension, and spiritual exegesis becomes reduced to archaeology and philology, not to speak of the extrapolation of the subjective errors of the present era back into the age of revelation in question”.

Theoretical knowledge is one thing; assimilated, “realized” knowledge quite another, and the latter absorbs and transforms the whole being of the knower. Sacred knowledge, he says, demands of man all that he is, which is why “it is not possible to attain this knowledge in any way but by being consumed by it”, and he quotes from Rūmī:

“The result of my life can be summarized in three words: I was immature, I matured, and I was consumed”.

This brings Dr. Nasr to one of the central themes of his lectures: the contrast between what he describes as “Pontifical Man” and secular, “Promethean man”. These terms offer a useful key for Western readers: The classical concept of the “Pontifex” who is the bridge or link between heaven and earth is very close to that of the *khalifatullāh fi’l’ard* and clearly represents the same primordial and universal principle, while the myth of Prometheus represents only too obviously Western man’s idea of himself as a little god, proud of stealing from heaven what is not his by right and defiant in the face of the Divine Law. Prometheus remains defiant even under the weight of punishment, and it is his nature to refuse to be consumed. In our time, as “Promethean man” approaches the end of his career, he has “succeeded in wreaking havoc upon the earth, upsetting the ecological balance of the natural order itself in some five centuries, has forgotten what it really means to be man and must therefore rediscover himself if he is not to be utterly lost”.

Pontifical man, on the other hand, “lives in full awareness of the Origin which contains his own perfection and whose primordial purity and wholeness he seeks to emulate, recapture and transmit. He also lives on a circle of whose Center he is always aware and which he seeks to reach in his life, thought and actions. Pontifical man is the reflection of the Center on the periphery and the echo of the Origin in later cycles of time and generations of history. He is the vice-regent of God....” According to the traditional perspective, this Center is timelessly present within man himself.

The Delphic Oracle’s command, “Know thyself!” and the saying of the Prophet of Islam that “He who knoweth himself knoweth his Lord” are true “not because man as an earthly creature is the measure of all things, but because man is himself the reflection of that archetypal reality which *is* the measure of all things”. The concept of *al-insān al-kāmil*, the Perfect Man, reminds us both of the grandeur (a grandeur that has nothing in common with Promethean “greatness”) of what man can be and the wretchedness of what—in most cases—he is when he forgets his true, “vice-regal” identity. “Man cannot live as a purely earthly creature totally at home in this world without destroying the natural environment precisely because he is not such a creature”.

It is impossible, says Dr. Nasr, to seek to efface the imprint of the Divinity upon man without destroying man himself: “The bitter experience of the modern world stands as overwhelming evidence of this truth. One cannot ‘efface’ the ‘face of God’ without ‘effacing’

man himself and reducing him to a faceless entity lost in an anthill. The cry of Nietzsche that ‘God is dead!’ could not but mean that ‘man is dead’, as the history of the twentieth century has succeeded in demonstrating in so many ways”. Reminding us that the cosmos is a “book” containing a primordial revelation, he says that “only a contemplative already endowed with sacred knowledge” can read the message written there; Promethean man is found to be an illiterate when confronted with the “signs” of Allah inscribed in creation.

Turning to a subject with which he has been concerned in a number of his books, “The Cosmos as Theophany”, that is to say as “a theatre in which are reflected the Divine Names and Qualities”; he adds that the cosmos is also “a crypt through which man must journey to reach the Reality beyond cosmic manifestation”. “In fact”, he says, “man cannot contemplate the cosmos as theophany until he has journeyed through and beyond it. That is why the traditional cosmologies are so concerned with providing man with a map which would orient him within the cosmos and finally enable him to escape beyond the cosmos through that miraculous act of deliverance with which so many myths have been concerned”. Believing only in a science confined to one single level of reality, the historians of science have dismissed traditional cosmology as no more than a fumbling attempt to describe the phenomena of the physical universe; it is only very recently—and not least through Dr. Nasr’s work—that there has been a movement to restore to them their true significance as “spiritual maps” which relate as much to man’s inner being as they do to his outer world.

Even within its own very limited sphere of observation and speculation the objectivity of modern science is questionable, indeed one can hardly speak of “objectivity” when the most important features of the object—its essence and its meaning—are ignored. It has come more and more to see in the world it observes “not what is there but what it has wanted to see, selecting what conforms to its methods and approaches and then presenting this as the knowledge of reality as such”.

Among the unprovable assumptions taken for granted by this science, Dr. Nasr mentions in particular the dogma—for such it is—that the laws of nature have always been the same, as though the uniformity of these laws and of time itself from the beginning of creation up to the present day were something that could be taken for granted without argument. There is, moreover, no place in the scientific method, with its pretention to detached objectivity, for love of the natural world and for the understanding in depth which goes with love. The spiritual man, on the other hand, “is always on nature’s side, for he sees in her the great theophany which externalizes all that he is inwardly. He sees in the forms of nature the signatures of the celestial archetypes and, in her movements and rhythms, the exposition of a metaphysic of the highest order”. To contemplate the universe as theophany is to realize that it comes from the One and returns to the One; it is to see God everywhere.

An entirely profane attitude to nature goes hand-in-hand with a reverence for change exemplified in the Marxist substitution of historical process for the Divinity, a process which

then calls up a response formerly reserved for the Sacred (“We regard Communism as sacred”, Khrushchev told Abdul Nasser). Many people today who are not consciously inclined towards Marxism nonetheless adopt a similar attitude and become incoherently angry at the suggestion that change may, as often as not, be for the worse (as is the case in a dying body). The stability of Islam is particularly hateful to those who worship change for its own sake, hence their efforts to persuade contemporary Muslims that stability is really “stagnation” and that fury and turmoil—in effect, *fitnah*—are in some way a sign of “dynamism”.

The connection between this reverence for change and the theory of evolution—Darwinism or neo-Darwinism—is obvious. Dr. Nasr points out that Muslim scientists over a thousand years ago were perfectly aware that the presence of seashells on the top of mountains meant that “seas had become mountains”, that land animals had preceded man on earth and that sea creatures had come before land animals. This did not however lead them to the “fanciful theories” associated with Darwinism, since they understood that the ultimate cause of all things is an immaterial cause. They saw the logical absurdity in supposing that “inert matter should become conscious or that a lower order of organization could by itself become a higher order of organization, apparently against not only logic but all that we know of the laws of physics”. He quotes in this context E. F. Schumacher’s reference to evolution as “science fiction rather than science”.

Turning to traditional art as a source both of knowledge and of grace, he reminds us that this art has always been “utilitarian”, whatever the cultural form it may have taken, but never with the limited meaning given to the word “utility” in connection with purely earthly man. Its utility, he says, always concerns “Pontifical man”, for whom beauty is “as essential a dimension of life” as the house that shelters him from the winter cold. Above all, traditional art “forges and forms an *ambiance* in which its truths are reflected everywhere, in which men breathe and live in a universe of meaning in conformity with the reality of the tradition in question”. In almost every case where an historical record exists, the tradition has created and formalized its sacred art before elaborating its theologies and philosophies, no doubt because human beings are, for the most part, more receptive to material forms than to ideas, and it is these material forms that make the deepest impression on the soul. The artist and the craftsman express their faith—or their lack of faith—in what they make, and their creations communicate faith or its absence, as the case may be, to those who live in their midst.

Dr. Nasr’s concluding lecture deals with “Knowledge of the Sacred as Deliverance”, and here the emphasis is upon “realized” rather than theoretic knowledge. “The unknown”, he says, “is not out there, beyond the present boundary of knowledge, but at the Center of man’s being here and now where it has always been. And it is unknown only because of our forgetfulness of its presence. It is a sun which has not ceased to shine simply because our blindness has made us impervious to its light”. Realized knowledge, since it concerns not only the intelligence but also the will and the whole psyche, “requires the acquisition of spiritual virtues, which is the manner in which man participates in that truth which is itself suprahuman”.

If this knowledge is to be taken seriously, both as it is in its essence and as it has existed in human history, then “it cannot be separated from revelation, religion, tradition and orthodoxy.... The possibilities in the human intellect which must be actualized in order for man to attain in a real and permanent manner sacred knowledge cannot be actualized save by the Intellect, the Logos or the manifestations of the Logos which constitute the various religions”. No man can find this way on his own or hope to achieve this spiritual realization without divine help. With this help, however, the human creature is capable of a knowledge which engages him totally, transforming his very nature; reason is then wed to faith and the mind is no more enslaved to “that insatiable rationalism which devours and, like an acid, burns the living tissues of the world, of man and of nature”.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr has presented, eloquently and against a background of great erudition, the stark contrast between, on the one hand, the traditional view of the nature of things and of man’s destiny and, on the other, the secular fragmented ideologies current in our time. In doing so he has offered his readers a plain choice between two entirely different paths leading to entirely different goals. Even those who have no hesitation in supposing that everything that was believed or thought until recent times is now obsolete will nonetheless be obliged to hesitate and to consider whether there may not be a genuine and viable alternative to the cul-de-sac in which modern man finds himself imprisoned. To be aware of this alternative is to be aware of hope and to discover, beyond the narrow alleyways, an open landscape which invites our entry.

Editorial Note

We are grateful to the Islamic Cultural Center, London, and to Mr. Gai Eaton: for permission to publish (in slightly amended form) this article which was written for a recent issue of *The Islamic Quarterly*.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The patient man hath a great and wholesome purgatory, who though he receive injuries, yet grieveth more for the malice of another than for his own suffering; who prayeth willingly for his adversaries, and from his heart forgiveth their offences. He delayeth not to ask forgiveness of whomsoever he hath offended; he is sooner moved to compassion than to anger; he often offereth violence to himself, and laboureth to bring his body wholly into subjection to the spirit.

The Imitation of Christ, 1.24.