

Traditional Islamic Environmentalism: The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Tarik M. Quadir

Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) is one of the most important living mystic-philosophers today. His consistent and clairvoyant critique of the materialism, secularism, and anthropocentrism of modernity for the last fifty years has been a wake-up call to many across the religious divide. Thus it is only fitting that the teachings on environment of a thinker who saw well before most of us the signs of our ominous times, one who wrote against the futility of technological fixes and the need to reject modern metaphysics, should be the subject of a dedicated monograph. The present book by Tarik M. Quadir is based on his PhD dissertation, which aims to present Nasr's contentions on the subject over his long and productive career in one coherent narrative. Being "the first person ever to write extensively about the philosophical and religious dimension of the crisis" (emphasis in the original), Nasr's critiques and specific suggestions are scattered in various writings and interviews. The book at hand seeks to be the go-to volume for "the response [to the ecological crisis] that he envisions for any human civilization" (pp. 4-6).

Nasr, educated in the United States since the age of thirteen, attended MIT and Harvard. Having taught in Iran, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere, he finally settled at the George Washington University. A renowned scholar and author of nearly fifty books and many more articles, his teachings are a blend of Shi'ism, Sufism, and, most of all, the perennialist, anti-modernist philosophy of René Guénon (1886-1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-98). Nasr's response to the environmental cataclysm is derived from his perennialist philosophy and is based on the spiritual reality of nature and its relevance to human purpose as defined by religion, and not merely on the basis of consideration for physical survival, which permeates nearly the entirety of environmentalist activism today.

Quadir reviews a swath of literature by various authors, including activists, scholars, and scientists, who warn of the end of our world as we know it and the limits of growth. From scientific projections to confessions of failure by leading environmentalists, several alarming and alarmist books are added to the list every month. Nasr argues that many mainstream environmentalists recognize that not only is business as usual (i.e., capitalist growth) unsustainable, but that the existing secular scientific and political systems possess no

spiritual resources to respond to the challenge due to the “mechanical vision of the universe” that offers “no transcendental rationale” for human existence. Nasr has long asked, “How are we going to stop people from wanting more and more if not through the power of the Spirit accessible through religion? ... No force in the world today, except religion, has the power to do that unless it be by sheer force” (p. 12).

Nasr’s own teachings are grounded in the perennialist philosophy, which claims to be Traditionalist with the capital “T.” Since it is based in no actual religion, perennialists dig into religious traditions for their essence, which they insist consists of three principles: the Unity of the Supreme Principle, the Hierarchic structure of Reality, and the Ultimate meaningfulness or purposefulness of all things in the universe. Religions that have these principles are deemed “authentic religious traditions” (p. 17). Both Quadir and Nasr insist upon the “essential identity between the principles of Islamic metaphysics and those of the perennial philosophy,” which is how Nasr claims to be both a Traditionalist and a traditional Islamic philosopher. By this logic, modern materialism and secularism are the only exceptions to the harmonious and essentially identical pre-modern religious traditions.

Chapter 1 traces the historical root of the ecological crisis to rationalism. Chapter 2 expounds on the principles of perennial philosophy. Chapter 3 elaborates on the principles of Islamic environmentalism based on Nasr’s interpretation of Islamic history. Chapter 4 describes the advent of modernity and Islamic modernizers. Chapter 5 explains the Traditionalist nature of pre-modern Islamic sciences in contrast with modern science’s materialism. Chapter 6 elaborates on Nasr’s critique of modern science and scientism. Chapter 7 argues the value-laden nature of technology. Chapter 8 proposes going back to Neoplatonic philosophy as the basis for Islamic philosophy, and chapter 9 concludes with a summary of Nasr’s approach.

The author, who does not take account of Nasr’s many critics, limits himself to bringing together the various parts of Nasr’s contentions. Important questions remain untouched. If the kind of flexibility and selectivity Nasr demands in describing both the world and the various religious traditions are granted, might not any philosophy offer a perspective that puts itself at the center as the actual truth and others as true only inasmuch as they reflect it? In this sense, Traditionalism can be seen as an exact inversion of Enlightenment universalism. Despite the many wonderful insights that Traditionalists have produced, including their keen perception of the nature of modernity and its cataclysmic trajectory at the turn of the twentieth century, their claim to have found the essence of all (pre-modern) human traditions, rather than

acknowledge being a distinctive metaphysics distinguished perhaps for its ecumenism, has been, to its critics, its biggest trouble.

By the Traditionalist standard, all religions are true and all are equally false; only those elements of religion that the Traditionalists recognize as authentic and fundamental are in fact true parts of those religions. Theologians and exponents of those religions have to be divided into those who really know the essence of their religion and those who do not. Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) and Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), for instance, are seen as the truest exponents of Islam and Christianity, respectively. Modern critics like Richard Foltz, who accuse Nasr of selective reading of Islamic traditions focusing only on those authorities in Islam who were deeply influenced by Hellenistic Neoplatonism and may have been marginal to their own tradition, are summarily dismissed by Quadir (p. 28ff). Presumably, those Christians, Muslims, and Hindus who fail to recognize the ultimate unity of all religions and their ultimate identity with the Tradition have corrupted their traditions or are blind to their essence. Some might argue, furthermore, that to judge a religion’s worth by the standards of environmental considerations is to instrumentalize it. Nasr’s view that most pre-modern traditions shared a deep sense of reverence for nature, or divine handiwork, is quite defensible; however, this does not necessarily justify his more specific contentions.

The problem, as far as the colossal challenge of the environmental collapse is concerned, is not that Nasr is wrong but that the very existence of such a deep disagreement undermines his project. Granted the mobilizing power of religion that he points out, and given that there is no such entity as “religion” but only particular traditions, how could these be mobilized in the name of an abstract unity of all traditions, rather than the thick traditions of beliefs, practices, and communities on which religious traditions’ mobilizing power crucially depends? The challenge is that regardless of Traditionalism’s own claims, from the perspective of an outsider – even a sympathetic one – it is nothing more than a new religious philosophy if not a new religion.

If that is the case, how is it to recruit the power of “religion” against materialism? That depends not on its being right, but on its being convincing to those who are most committed to their religious traditions; those precisely who are most likely to reject what they perceive as a watered-down, instrumentalized version of their traditions. There is another reason why the proposal that all pre-modern religions unite against modern materialism may leave us no closer to the solution. The fiercest battle lines today are found within each religious tradition between those who wish to embrace the mate-

rialism of modernity to advance their particular type of religiosity and those who do not, and there is a whole spectrum in between. Might there be other ways to encourage intra-religious and interreligious cooperation on the myriad environmental challenges than to require commitment to a particular metaphysics? These are not the questions Quadir or Nasr take up.

Whether one is persuaded by Nasr's reading of the ultimate reality of all things and religions, one cannot underestimate the force of his critique of the modern world and his insights about the insufficiency of materialist solutions. The present book, which does a fine job of collecting and presenting Nasr's vision, may serve as a point of departure for more critical conversations.

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