



## Analysing Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Approach to the Clash of Traditionalism and Modernity

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### Abstract

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the most ardent critique of modernity, has criticised modernity in the light of theology and tradition. Nasr believes that the scientific age has made human beings more dependent on “Scientific knowledge” than on “Sacred knowledge”. He has laid more emphasis on sacred knowledge which he believes is the knowledge of God as revealed and spread through traditions and religions. He believes that empirical and rational faculties alone cannot ascertain sacred knowledge, but only when it is practised in the sacred way as it had been revealed to humans. He observed that modernity had created distance between God and man and that the human beings have more faith in scientific knowledge than sacred knowledge. The paper will try to examine his endorsement of traditionalism and theology over modernism. The paper will also examine the grounds on which Hossein Nasr has raised critique against modernity and tries to explain different alternatives to modernism.

Keywords: *Modernity, Traditionalism, Hossein Nasr, Empirical, Rational, Theology, Perennial Philosophy, Sufism.*

### Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933)<sup>1</sup> is well known scholar, philosopher and a traditionalist. Presently by profession a University professor in Washington University has authored nearly fifty books and more than five hundred articles on philosophy, Art, Islamic philosophy, Sufism, Perennialism and Environmental crisis.<sup>2</sup> Nasr belonging to a particular school of thought ‘Perennialism and traditionalism,’ has been influenced by a number of perennialist scholars, like Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), and Rene Guenon (1886-1951).<sup>3</sup> Nasr as admired by the traditional metaphysics of these scholars is regularly contributing in the field of comparative religion and perennial philosophy. The whole

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<sup>1</sup> Nasr born in Iran, Tehran in 1933 and is presently working as a professor in the Department of religion at the George Washington University in Washington DC.

<sup>2</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (2001), *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr ed.*, Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Library of Living Philosophers volume XXVIII), Open Court Publishing Company, P. 4-86

See also Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (1987), *Traditional Islam in the modern world*, Kegan Paul International, London and New York p. i

<sup>3</sup> Op.cit., 494

work of this traditionalist circle including Nasr is a strong contribution towards Traditional Metaphysics, cosmology and perennial philosophy and is a very strong critical to Modernity.<sup>4</sup> The first figures of this circle such as Coomaraswamy and Guenon had developed a strong criticism to modernism and defended number of common doctrines. However, their criticism later involved number of thinkers like Huston Smith, Marco Pallis, Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings.<sup>5</sup> The whole group from time to time had compiled a traditional doctrine, which in one sense explains tradition and its values and in another sense criticizes modernity.

Nasr among this traditionalist circle however is little different by following its own tradition and has a tremendous affection towards perennial philosophy and Sufism and is itself a Sufi. The perennial and Sufi influences had created postmodern tendencies in Nasr's ideology. Nasr's meaning of tradition has become related to the perennial wisdom which he says lies in every religion and is like *Sophia Perennis* of western tradition, *Sanatana Dharma* in Hindus and *al-hikmat al-khalidah* in Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Nasr sees it as a framework for practical life. Huxley's work *Perennial Philosophy*,<sup>7</sup> through which Nasr was influenced, stated perennial philosophy provides a common foundation for metaphysical and epistemological system. However, the term *perennial philosophy* was first used by Agostino Steuco (1497-1548) and later on used by Leibniz and Steuco identified it with perennial wisdom embracing both philosophy and theology and not related to just one school of wisdom or thought.<sup>8</sup> Huxley explains it as "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine reality substantial to the worlds of things and lives and minds."<sup>9</sup> He claims metaphysic spread many areas of life such as Psychology and ethics and may be found among the traditions of primitive people across the world. Perennial philosophy which has a place in every religion can provide an alternate solution to the problems raised by modern age.<sup>10</sup> It might be reason why Nasr was influenced by the perennial philosophy and its proponents such as Huxley, Schuon, Coomaraswamy and others as well. The main assumption of Nasr is to return to tradition of every religion so that to overcome the problems that modernity had created. He explains tradition as the transmission of knowledge, practice, laws from one generation to another either in written or oral way. Tradition he means truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind.<sup>11</sup>

The term traditional is perhaps even more vague than modern. Generally this term is understood in contrast to the modern. We generally understand the things or habits which we follow from our ancestors and which are imported into our society

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<sup>4</sup> Quadir, M. Tariq, (2013), *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism*, University press of America, P. 04. See also Schwencke A. M., (2009), Leiden University p. 51

<sup>5</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (2004), *The Heart of Islam, Enduring Values for Humanity*, HarperCollins Publishers Inc. p. 108

<sup>6</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (1989), *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany, State university of New York press, p. 65

<sup>7</sup> The well-known work of A. Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*, New York, 1945, is one of the works which has sought to demonstrate the existence and to present the content of this enduring and perennial wisdom through selections of sayings drawn from various traditions.

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (1989), *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany, State university of New York press, p. 65

<sup>9</sup> Huxley Aldous, (1947), *The Perennial Philosophy*, Chatto and windus, London, p. 01

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (1989), *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany, State university of New York press, p 64

from the past i.e., prior to modernization as traditional. Indirectly we understand Tradition with reference to European culture and when we look towards a period of European history before reformation we call that 'traditional' and later on 'Modern', but "to call non-western society traditional is therefore to claim that it is similar to Europe before the reformation. In contrast to modernism, traditionalism can be used to designate any movement of resistance to modernization, or the view that pre-modern societies are superior to modernised societies."<sup>12</sup>

Traditionalists advocate that the notion of authentic traditions is rooted in divine revelation and the common features which were found in every religion across pre-modern societies, whether it was Islamic, Christianity, Hinduism and other religion. The common features of those societies which were universal are called tradition and the advocacy of these universal features over modern societies is traditionalism.<sup>13</sup> The statement simply reflects a form of religious pluralism in all these religions. Looking the viewpoint of Nasr, as he states that God will raise up traditionalism in all religions to save humanity from spiritual poverty which is caused by modernity and postmodernity. Nasr tries not to criticise modernity but rather try to assimilate it with tradition. He believes that modernity has disconnected themselves from the ideas of tradition which were divine in nature and which contained spirituality and were revealed by God, had caused this spiritual poverty. All the activities of modern thought from science to philosophy and psychology to religion possess certain universal characteristics and traits which nasr recognise as anthropomorphic in nature. He believes that modernity stands for everything human and it negates anything which is transcendent.<sup>14</sup>

For Nasr, the term 'Modern' neither means 'Contemporary' nor 'up-to-date', nor does it signify for him something that is successful in the conquest and domination of the natural world. Rather for him 'modern' means that which is cut off from the Transcendent.<sup>15</sup> Nasr asserts that 'Modern paradigm' had created spiritual crisis of modern man. Modern man only thinks about himself and he or she has forgotten all about nature and divine realities. He acknowledges variety of thoughts and movements that shape the modern man but Nasr sees it more a challenge than an opportunity. It is during these three or four centuries that western cultural paradigm became the main driving force for the modern crisis.

Nasr has not completely rejected the fruits of the western civilization nor does he completely reject modern science and technology. What he rejects is the scientific claim about absolute knowledge? Highlighting the two fundamental errors on which 'scientism' is based first; a disregard of the 'deeper nature of man' and second a 'disregard of the sacred reality of nature'.<sup>16</sup> Nasr asserts modernity has reduced nature

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<sup>12</sup> Legenhausen, H. M. (2002). *Why I Am Not a Traditionalist*. URL: <http://religioscope.com/info/doc/esotrad/legenhausen.htm>, p.07

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 07

<sup>14</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (1987), *Traditional Islam in the modern world*, Kegan Paul International, London and New York p. 100

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 98-99

<sup>16</sup> Schwencke A. M., (2009), *Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Traditionalism, Islamic Esotericism & Environmental Ethics*, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands, p. 23

to mere quantity and mechanical relationship, the nature which has lost its inherent significance and modernity has never spoken about spirituality. The main affect that scientific paradigm created is the oppression of nature and caused more materialistic greed. It reduced human beings and his consciousness, psyche and spiritual abilities to material reality. Nasr claims modernity has bought a huge destruction and imbalance of the natural environment.<sup>17</sup>

Nasr as a strong opponent has found number of flaws in the modern paradigm and calls for a transformation of the paradigm. The paradigm has left humanity with limited and a partial knowledge and a reductionist and 'truncated' vision of reality. What Nasr is suggesting is a new form of vision or a 'greater vision', new metaphysical and cosmological doctrines? Nasr suggests a critical re-examination of our collective understanding about what human and nature means and what our relation is with the nature. Nasr sees the alternatives in the life of traditional societies.<sup>18</sup> While compering these traditional societies with Modern Societies he finds it more secular and modern in the sense of having complete faith on modern science and technology where as traditional societies were spiritual and less modern. The drastic change that happened few centuries ago during the process of modernization is that the traditional values which were highly spiritual have disappeared and the new values occur, which are modern and are more materialistic. These two systems Traditional and modern become the competing components in the present society. They create unrest, a gap, an alienation from religious beliefs between the individuals in the society. Nasr emphasizes on this problem from religious perspective. He argues that modernity has moved humanity far away from the divine revelation and closer towards secular science. Nasr claims that humans become more dependent upon themselves rather than on the real.

Nasr sees modernity, postmodernity, and modernization as interrelated and created the same challenge to traditional religion and values. He sees these three movements in this way: Modernity was a period when humans had a belief in reason to understand and control the nature and world. When humans relied more upon rationality and scientific technology which bought modernisation and which allowed humans to control the nature more than even before. Explaining postmodernism Nasr simply says, it is the continuation of modernity and is nothing new because humans have been continuously moving far away from relying upon Divine Revelation and more towards human rational and scientific knowledge. During the increase of modernisation humans become more self-reliant and individualistic, supporting more modernisation has led humanity into postmodernism. Most of these developments happened in the west and through globalization it spread throughout the world. This led Nasr to believe that modernism is a completely western phenomenon and he used this reason to explain that 'Modernisation, Postmodernisation and westernisation' are a one single movement, which affected the whole population across the globe. All the elements of the west whether it is education, economics or politics or their own values

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 24

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 26

have influenced traditional belief and values. This influence according to Nasr spread to every nook and corner of the world and thus drifted humanity from the traditional religious beliefs into the web of modernity.

The whole movement Nasr see it as a political, social and economic issue and is completely based on the western phenomenon. Which later develop a kind of fundamentalism and a type of strong materialistic greed among societies that lost all values of the traditional societies? Religious values has completely weakened and bought new kind of illness among people. Modern man loses control over their materialistic greed which was bonded with religious values. Now in that place a new substitution has been created in the form of modern ethics or modernity. Whom Nasr believes has done nothing but is working as a pseudo-religion. The new gods of that are such idols like development and progress, who not control human passion but increase it day by day.<sup>19</sup> From the traditional point of view it is difficult to understand in the modern mind-set how rituals have a relation with nature of physical realities. They consider rituals as personal, individual and subjective however; traditionalists consider them as God-made and are descended from heaven. Nasr explains “A ritual is an enactment or rather re-enactment here on earth of a divine prototype.”<sup>20</sup> He means rituals act as a law to bound humans on earth with religion in a sense to preserve its nature and other aspects. These rituals traditionalist believes have divine origin and are not invented or man-made and it is impossible to live in harmony with nature without the ritualized relationship with natural world. Modernists have not maintained any relation of them with nature nor did they give any legitimacy of the religious knowledge of nature. The result of which is the loss of the way of studying nature religiously.

To overcoming this disaster Nasr suggests to return to the traditional religion and try to recognise the difference between the metaphysical and the materialistic knowledge. In this field Nasr is not seeing alone to show his dissatisfaction with modernity but Coomaraswamy and Guenon has earlier shown alarming situation in modernity. Apart from these thinkers from the origin of the industrial revolution, there were number of voices which proclaim that society and culture had taken a wrong turn and that something valuable is being destroyed and lost. However, some critics of modernity focused on the social problems of modern life, while others are focusing on the crisis and its drastic change in society and as well as on environmental conditions. Usually we say that social problems of modernity are a result of negligence of some important truths. For many Islamic philosophers especially Nasr, Modern crisis are due to moving away from the traditional teaching of Islam. For the Catholics, modern woes are due to neglect of the teachings of the Church and also for Hindu modern crisis are due to neglecting their traditional values.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, the central concern for the traditionalists is that they view the modernism as an epistemological and not an ontological phenomenon. They come-up with an

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<sup>19</sup> 20. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, (2007), *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Bloomington Indianan, World Wisdom. Volume One, p. 33

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 34

overt counter to the mode of the positivist and sensory approach towards knowledge under the discourse of modernism. Modernistic approach towards knowledge, thus viewed only sensory objects by which they mean only real objects nothing other than these objects. This aspect is negated by the traditionalists' approach towards knowledge. On the contrary the modernists denied the principles of traditionalism and considered it as a by-product of modernism itself owing to its emergence in the modern era. They believed that however, traditionalists generally condemn every ideology that emerged from modernity. It also condemns everything that is modern or the product of modernism hence in this sense it is self-defeating because it implicitly condemns itself. Yet it is another "ism" that emerged in modern period. From the modernistic point of view tradition itself cannot be made scale for evaluation nor it has given any alternative to the society for the betterment and its reforms. But, although, traditionalism is seen rejecting modernisation, development and scientific age on the basis of theological grounds yet it has succeeded in pointing out many important faults in modernity. The point is that there is much that is good in modernity, and much that is good in traditional societies and *vice versa*. These obvious facts seem to be ignored by Traditionalists and modernists.

Thus, to come out of this dilemma there should be a kind of a balanced worldview where the necessity to run the race in the changing world with an analytical sense towards the modernism whereby the drawbacks and the nuisance it gives rise to should be tackled by going back to the traditionalism which in case of Nasr is religion which can provide sufficient sources for the spiritual wellbeing of man. This is the singular approach according to Nasr or for that matter the traditionalism through which man can ensure a syncretized and balanced way of life in the modern era. Therefore, to end this clash between tradition and modernity, man has to channelize himself in between both the realms and shun the extremes to live a life tackling all the challenges.

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