

An Interview with Seyyed Hossein Nasr “Scripture, Society, and Traditional Wisdom”

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JPS: The traditional, or perennial, philosophy of which you are a well-known proponent reserves a privileged place for the sacred scriptures of the religious traditions of the world. The majority of Western philosophy over the past few centuries has been in the process of segregating itself from these scriptures. How would you characterize the different approaches of Western philosophy and traditional philosophy to sacred scripture?

SHN: There's a very profound distinction, if by Western philosophy you mean modern Western philosophy. In the West, Christian and Jewish philosophy both in the middle ages and, to some extent, afterwards still paid a great deal of attention to the scriptures, and Islamic philosophy has always paid attention to the scriptures. Not that it has just based itself on the scriptures, or it would be just theology and not philosophy, but it has paid a great deal of attention especially to the inner meaning of scripture. Some of the great Islamic philosophers like Mulla Sadra, and before him Ibn Sina (Avicenna), had written commentaries upon the Qur'an. And we have parallels in the west: St. Thomas Aquinas, and many Jewish thinkers and philosophers as well.

Now modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, is characterized by practically a total disregard for scripture as a source of philosophical knowledge. Although there are people here and there

who pay some attention to this, by and large European philosophy in the modern period from Descartes on is not concerned with scripture. If it is, it would be only on the level of ethics but not metaphysics. Perennial philosophy, on the other hand, looks upon the scriptures as revelations from God and believes that in the inner dimension, the esoteric dimension, of scriptures is contained the perennial wisdom with which the perennial philosophy is concerned. So the heart, the inner aspect of the religions as revealed in scriptures contain that *religio perennis*, that eternal religion, or the *sophia perennis*, the eternal wisdom, with which perennial philosophy is concerned. And therefore, perennial philosophy pays a great deal of attention to scripture, not only as a source of ethics but also as a source of metaphysics.

JPS: You made a distinction between having scripture as a foundation, which would be more like theology, and paying attention to scripture within a philosophical context. How can philosophy pay attention to and incorporate scripture when most scriptures are not written in philosophical language, often using narrative or metaphor to convey their meaning?

SHN: I think that can be clarified by having recourse to two very important truths which have been emphasized a great deal in perennial philosophy. First of all, the perennial philosophers believe that the instrument of revelation is none other than the intellect, understood metaphysically, which is also the element which illuminates our mind and provides us with knowledge. For example, in Arabic the word '*aql*', which means the intellect—not only reason but also intellect in the medieval sense of the term—is also associated with the very instrument of revelation, the archangel Gabriel who brought the Qur'an to the Prophet. And also in Augustinian illuminationistic philosophy, knowledge is considered to be a kind of illumination by the angel, and revelation is also concerned with the coming into this world of a message

through what one could call angelic agency. Therefore, the first point is that the means whereby scripture is revealed and the means whereby one knows in a noetic and intellectual sense are the same.

Secondly, philosophers—that is, traditional philosophers, those who follow the perennial philosophy—they have looked upon scripture not simply on its literal level but on its symbolic level. So even something which is descriptive, let us say the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament, have been the source of very profound metaphysical commentaries and mystical commentaries, because the traditional philosophers have looked upon the text not only in its literal aspect but in its symbolic aspect. In Islam we have many, many commentaries upon the Qur'an, by both Sufis and Islamic philosophers, in which even what appears to be narrative of some sacred history is interpreted in a symbolic way to convey meanings which are transhistorical and metaphysical.

JPS: Recently many so-called postmodern philosophers from the continental tradition have been incorporating readings of scriptures and other religious texts in a way that is, in a sense, much more open than some of their modern predecessors. Do you think this might signal new possibilities for a dialogue with the traditional perspective?

SHN: I don't think so. Of course, it depends on where postmodernism goes. Every few years, some new current comes, and by the time you study it some other new current comes. As far as studying scripture, yes, that would be an opening, but postmodernism by and large denies certitude in knowledge. It tries to deconstruct the world of meaning of traditional philosophies, and its understanding of the intellect, of our noetic faculties, of the way we know are very different from what the perennial philosophy envisages. So although there is now some interest in the reading of scripture, how we read and what it means I think in the two cases are very different.

JPS: Also, the postmodern thinkers tend to emphasize things like cultural differences that they would take to be absolute...

SHN: Well, they're relativists; that is, ultimately they read sacred scripture, but they do not accept revelation in the real sense of the term—that there's a divine reality, God, who can reveal knowledge to human beings, whether in the form of a book, or, in India, in the form of creatures, or whatever it is. Revelation as understood metaphysically, they do not accept that. So, what is important for them, as you say, is cultural determinance, which reduces things to a kind of relativism. This has been going on for a long time, and much of postmodern philosophy is the extreme denouement, unfolding, of that process. By that I mean that, for a long time now in the West, philosophers who have been rationalists have tried to deny the certitudes of religion, and that's why natural theology gradually became marginalized and Christians who tried to continue to accept religion based themselves upon faith rather than upon reason. Now there's a kind of revival within Catholic theology, and to some extent Protestant theology, to try to come back to the older position. Anyway, as far as philosophy is concerned, it began to relativize these matters, and in the nineteenth century sociology and the positivism of Auguste Comte and these people tried to reduce all religious truth to consequences of a social situation—socially determined, culturally determined. That is, let's say, if Moses received the revelation on Mount Sinai that "thou shalt not kill," that was now a revelation that was culturally determined by the conditions of the nomads on the Sinai peninsula or something like that, or the Jews in Egypt.

Now, tradition does not accept that at all, and perennial philosophy is not concerned with reducing the truth of scripture to culturally determined conditions but accepts that scripture comes from God and tries to understand its inner meaning. Of course, it accepts the fact that, as the Qur'an says, God only speaks to people in their

language; that is, scripture is revealed in a particular language for a particular humanity to understand. But by virtue of its inner levels of meaning, it has a meaning that transcends those conditions. For example, let me take the specific case of Christianity. Christ said in the famous Sermon on the Mount in Jerusalem some very exalted ethical teachings. Now, many Christians consider that to be valid, and to say, “Oh, that was determined by the social and cultural conditions of Jerusalem at that time, and they’re totally irrelevant to Washington, DC or Philadelphia in 2004.”... There are some people who say that, there’s no doubt about it, but those who remain Christians do not believe that the teachings of Christ are simply culturally determined by the Palestine of 2000 years ago. And philosophically speaking, as far as the perennial philosophy is concerned, there’s no way that these postmodern philosophers can prove that scripture is simply determined by cultural conditions. It’s just a matter of faith by them that scriptures are not revealed, as it is a matter of faith by people of faith that they are revealed.

JPS: As you mentioned—and I think this is one of the points of perennial philosophy that are most misunderstood by people thinking outside it—there is still an emphasis in the perennial philosophy on those differences despite the certainty of revelation.

SHN: Oh absolutely, the perennial philosophy emphasizes not only that there are differences of forms, but that the differences of forms are themselves significant—that Hinduism doesn’t look like Judaism on the level of forms—and what these forms mean. But what it refuses to do is to deny that there is such a thing as a reality beyond the temporal. Whereas most of these postmodern philosophers, that’s what they do. They don’t want to come out and say it, but they deny that there is any reality beyond the spatio-temporal sequence in which we live, and therefore everything is reduced to that flow in time.

JPS: Do you think that Islam and the history of Islamic philosophy lends itself and has leant itself more easily to the adoption of the traditional perspective than, say, Christianity in the West, which has become increasingly secularized throughout the modern period?

SHN: Yes, and the reason for that is that in the Islamic world what we would call *gnosis*, pure metaphysics, a spiritual path based on knowledge, the knowledge that saves and that is illuminative, continued to survive and was very strong until modern times. Whereas in the Christian West, these forms of sapiential knowledge and perspective and spirituality became to a large extent eclipsed at the end of the middle ages, and that gave rise to nominalism, first of all, while Christian philosophy was still alive, and then a rebelling against Christian philosophy in the Renaissance and especially in the seventeenth century with modern philosophy. These things did not occur in the Islamic world, not because Islamic philosophers were stupid and didn’t understand what these Western philosophers were doing, but because there was no need in a Cartesian way to overcome a doubt which had been created in the mind of Descartes precisely because of the loss of intellectual intuition. In the earlier period of Christian history, the trajectory of the life of Christian philosophy and Islamic philosophy were very similar, besides the fact that many Islamic texts were translated into Latin and influenced Western philosophy a great deal. Independently of the influence, Christian philosophy was following a path very similar in many ways—not identical because for example Christian philosophy accepted the incarnation and Islamic philosophy did not, but in many ways similar. But Islamic philosophy, rather than turning against illumination towards empiricism as it did in the West, in fact went the other way around and became more and more wed to the doctrines of illumination and knowledge that is illuminative and salvific, and therefore survived as a very important, you might say,

protector of the perennial philosophy up to our own times.

JPS: Do you think that there is anything particular in the foundation of the Christian tradition—for instance the belief in the incarnation—that would have made it more susceptible to a modern, Cartesian turn, or do you think it is just a contingency of history?

SHN: It's a very complicated matter, and there are several elements that made it possible for anti-religious forces to overcome Christian thought more easily than in any other part of the world, as far as other religions are concerned. First of all, Christianity was heir to a rabid rationalism in the ancient Mediterranean world and so came as a way of love to overcome this false rationalism. But soon, of course, it had developed its own ways of *sapiens*, its own philosophies, and it did so but was not able to neutralize completely the paganism of the ancient world. It did for some time, but then it [rationalism] raised its head in the Renaissance independently of Christianity and marginalized to a large extent Christian philosophy. Not so that it died completely, but it was marginalized to a large extent, and the mainstream of European philosophy became secularized. Nothing like that occurred in any of the other civilizations of the world, not only in the Islamic but also Hindu, Chinese, Japanese, etc. In those cases, it was the militarily powerful West, which became militarily powerful as a result of secularism, that dominated over those worlds militarily during the colonial period and brought secularism with it, which is quite a different process.

And there are many other elements in the structure of Christianity. For example, in Islam the esoteric dimension, associated with Sufism primarily, and the form of knowledge, of *gnosis*, of divine knowledge which is preserved therein, was always very clearly protected throughout the history of the tradition. Although here or there somebody may have attacked it, it remained very viable and vibrant. Whereas in

Christianity, while we have the great mystical currents of the middle ages, some of which like that of St. Bonaventure and Dante are very sapiential and really are forms of perennial philosophy at the highest level, they were not protected by the Church at all, and, in fact, gradually they were put down. So in the modern period, you can ask the question, "What happened to Christian mysticism? Why were there no Meister Eckharts and St. Bonaventures in eighteenth century Germany or France? What happened?" Of course, secularism destroyed many things, but also the religion itself—the Church itself—was not the guardian of the esoteric currents. So after the middle ages, it became more and more a means of putting them down, so that some of them became marginalized, some of them became cults, some of them died out, and by and large access to the more inner dimension of Christianity became less and less available after the middle ages. All of these are elements that have to be considered, and it's a very complex set of events that are contained in your question.

JPS: You've noted in your work three distinct attitudes in contemporary Islam, the so-called fundamentalist, the modern, and the traditional, and you observe that only the first two have become instantiated in socio-political institutions. So, what kind of political, ethical, and ecological consequences would a more concrete form of the traditional perspective have?

SHN: I do not know that the world is good enough for the traditional perspective to have direct political expression, only God knows, but it does have its influence in the other two worlds. The fact that there is no government in the Islamic world today that is neither fundamentalist nor modernist but traditional doesn't mean that the influence of traditional Islam is not strong in other ways in those countries which are either fundamentalist or modern. This having been said, if there were to be a whole state structure, a whole social structure based on traditional Islamic teachings... First of all,

there would be a lack of this extremism which characterizes certain parts of the Islamic world today, which we associate with fundamentalism, and this exclusivism. There would be a much more accommodating attitude towards other religions, as we see in traditional Islamic history—for example, the Ottoman Empire in Iran, in Egypt the Mamluk period, in Spain especially during Islamic rule, and so forth. Secondly, there would not be this rabid acceptance of Westernization and modernization. Some elements are unavoidable, I accept that today. But many things are avoidable, and those could be avoided and as much as possible traditional forms of arts, of crafts, of creation, of alternative technologies could be used. And that itself would have a very profound effect upon the ecological questions. Today in the Islamic world every country, whether it's modernist or fundamentalist, is trying to ape Western technology and industry, and therefore with it all of the ecological consequences that this modernist tradition has brought upon us throughout the world. It [traditionalism] would be a much more sane way of dealing with the world of nature.

Now, whether other countries in the world, I mean outside the Islamic world, would allow such a thing to survive is another question. That's a question for another day and not for me to discuss. But, if there were to be, let's say, a country which would be ruled completely on the basis of traditional Islamic teachings, there would be these differences: the attitude towards other religions, the attitude towards other minorities, the question of the revival of Islamic art, of Islamic traditional thought, and at the same time modes of production which would be more traditional and less destructive of the environment, and many other things. It's very difficult, of course, while we have a global economy which tries to encompass everything within itself, to have exceptions. So there are degrees to which this could be done. I'm not saying it could be done one-hundred percent, while the rest of the world is galloping in another direction. But there would be perceptible

changes. Meanwhile, the role of the traditional Islam in the Islamic world is precisely to try to prevent forms of extreme interpretation, either on behalf of the fundamentalists or the modernists in the Islamic world. That role is a very significant one.