

THE AUTHORS OF this review have no hesitation in saying that Seyyed Hossein Nasr is the most important living philosopher in the world today. This is primarily because he meets the ultimate criteria of what a philosopher should be: not only is he a 'lover of wisdom' (the true meaning of 'philosopher') but he is in fact a living example of that wisdom. His brilliant mind has been acknowledged worldwide, but what is essential is that it is rooted within the perspective of Divine Revelation.

Now over seventy years old, Nasr has published some fifty books and 500 or so articles – indeed, the well-known saying "The pen of the scholar is mightier than the sword" could have been inspired by the work of Nasr himself! Selecting his 'essential' works is a feat in itself, and the editor of this book, William Chittick, concludes his introduction by observing with some understatement that "choosing Nasr's 'essential' writings from his vast corpus has been no easy task." Chittick, himself a former – and foremost – student of Nasr and an eminent scholar in his own right, has very sensibly "been guided" in his selections by the assumption that most readers of this book will not be familiar with Nasr's writings and would therefore like an overview of his main points. With this in mind he has divided the book into three parts, and this makes for a good and clear method of navigating Nasr's great corpus – useful for those familiar with his work as well as those reading him for the first time.

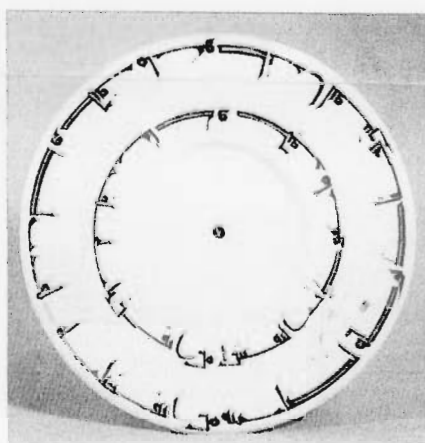
The first part, entitled 'Religion', concentrates on "the significance of the traditionalist perspective for the understanding of religion in a contemporary situation"; the second part, entitled 'Islam', focuses on the application of this perspective to Islam; and the third, 'Tradition', comprises a selection of Nasr's writings on the main themes of the traditionalist school such as metaphysics, cosmology, art and the limitations of modern thought. The first section of the book includes Nasr's essential piece on 'Religion and the Environmental Crisis'; his analysis of the direct relationship between the sacred perspective and our current environmental crisis is not only brilliant but points the way to the most comprehensive and immediate solution. In chapter four, the essay entitled 'One God', Nasr demonstrates his insistence on the Oneness of God and on the principle that Unity and unification are the ultimate goal

LOVER OF WISDOM

Keith Critchlow & Emma Clark
enjoy the writings of a
brilliant mind.

The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Edited by William C. Chittick
World Wisdom Books, USA, 2007, £24.95



Khurasan plate bearing an Islamic precept, from *The World of Islam* by Bernard Lewis, published by Thames & Hudson, 1992, UK, ISBN 0-500-27624-2

of the true philosopher: this is possibly his most important message today – and in the current climate this is not fashionable, to say the least. Amongst all the arguments about religion, his authoritative voice contains a powerful reminder that all three Abrahamic revelations worship the same One God. He also makes clear that if the sincere seeker wishes to find the heart of Islam, the best path is through Sufism. In chapter seven, 'The Integration of the Soul', Nasr makes clear the heart of his philosophical outlook: his profound belief in the transcendent unity of all religions and the transformation of the soul being the essence of human development. However, what he insists upon is that this transformation cannot take place autonomously but must do so from within one of the great revealed traditions of the world.

Today Nasr is known the world over for his expertise on all subjects relating to Islam and Islamic studies (he has been University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Washington, DC since

1984), subjects as diverse as Islamic science, cosmology, art, music, philosophy, religion, spirituality and Sufism, as well as being an expert on modern physics (receiving a Ph.D. in physics from MIT in the 1950s), geology and geophysics. Chittick's introduction to this book makes fascinating reading, giving a brief account of Nasr's extraordinary life and brilliant career. However, unlike others who are accorded brilliant careers in the world, Nasr is one in whom the light shines from within, his worldly accolades being useful for spreading his message, but not fundamental to his great authority.

The story Chittick tells in the Introduction about himself – how he thought he had "mastered the topic of Sufism after studying the standard Orientalist accounts" until he listened to Nasr's lecture on 'The Spiritual Path in Islam' and realised then that "something important was missing" – is a story that many a student could echo. This is because Nasr himself is a living testimony to the integration of knowledge and the sacred: his extraordinary gift is to inspire the audience not just to understand the sacred nature of our existence on a theoretical level but to strike a deeper chord that makes the sacred immanent. He is a reminder that the supreme contribution of one man has a radiating effect which, like ripples in a pool, reaches far and wide.

One criticism is that the book does not indicate from which of Nasr's works the essays have been chosen. Although this may not be important for the general reader, it is frustrating for the more serious student who may well want to follow up a particular subject. Other books in the series such as *The Essential Titus Burckhardt* include these references, so one wonders why the editors/publishers did not take this care.

However, none of this detracts from the content of the book. *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* is an important and timely introduction to the work of the world's greatest living philosopher, and we hope it will tempt new readers to investigate his writings further.

Keith Critchlow is a world-renowned lecturer, practitioner and writer on sacred geometry, art and architecture, and is Professor Emeritus at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London. Emma Clark is a garden designer and writer specialising in Islamic gardens, and is Senior Tutor on the graduate programme at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts.
www.psta.org.uk