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Book Reviews

The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. By William Chittick. Bloomington, In: World Wisdom, 2007. 250 pages.

The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers a considerably elucidating account of the essence of Nasr's corpus. In its 21 edited and abridged essays, William Chittick has demonstrated extraordinary carefulness and great discernment of Nasr's overall wisdom. The book is divided into three major parts, through which the reader is gradually acquainted with the traditionalist position on a wide range of topics under three main headings: Religion, Islam and Tradition.

In the first part, Nasr reestablishes the importance of the traditionalist view of religion today. He highlights three 'realities,' the grasp of which is inevitable to any attempt at approaching other religions. First is art, the visible expression of religion. Second is 'aqidah, its doctrine encoded in sacred texts. Third are its members of spiritual and saintly character. All three 'realities' have to be taken seriously, and the failure to realize any one of them will lead to the negation of religion as a whole. According to Nasr, the disarray and inadequacy that mounts modern Western scholars' conception of other religions have roots in two historical experiences. The first is due to a systematic isolation by which Christian Europe had scarce contact with other religions until the 19th century. The second is related to the emergence of the secular approaches to religion, including the historical, evolutionary and positivist. The phenomenological turn in the 20th century also had a direct influence on the way religion is perceived as a mere phenomenon devoid of spirit. Traditionalists object to this view and consider all religions equal; yet their equality is to be assessed through "metaphysical discernment."

The school of Tradition, or *philosophia perennis*, is founded on three major metaphysical principles: Reality, Tradition and Unity. The doctrine of Reality refers to the Ultimate Reality which is always absolute, infinite and immune to all attempts of categorization. Traditionalists understand the universe to be hierarchically consisted of “many levels of existence and states of consciousness from the Supreme Principle to earthly man and his terrestrial ambiance” (21). The doctrine of Tradition speaks of a “Primordial Tradition” which is the source of all existing traditions, while Unity denotes a “transcendental unity” which underlies the diversity of all religions. Consequently, religions cannot be reduced to their socioeconomic or psychological aspects since they all mark a vertical descent from the “Divine Origin.” This particular perspective is echoed in almost every chapter of the book, and forms the core of the teachings of Tradition.

The second part of the book applies Nasr’s reading of *philosophia perennis* on key subjects in Islam. The first chapter concentrates on a classical question in Tradition, namely *tawhid* (the testimony to the oneness of God). It elaborates the different ways in which *tawhid* is not only a form of belief for Muslims but also the centre around which everything in their life, thus everything called Islamic, revolves. The chapters entitled “The Nature of Man” and “The Integration of the Soul” are the most elucidative of the traditionalist view on the human being’s cosmological position. Nasr provides a fascinating discussion of the doctrine of the Universal/Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and how and who can attain this position. The Universal Man is one whose soul is unified and integrated with his body and mind. Nasr, unlike other traditionalists, believes that to achieve the integration of the soul one has first to accept the *shari‘a* law (Islamic jurisprudence). In addition, he formulates a sophisticated illustration of the central role of philosophy in Islam. Special focus is dedicated to Suhrawardi’s *mudrasat al-ishraq* (school of Illumination) and to Mula Sadra’s metaphysics of synthesis.

The third part introduces central themes in the contemporary discourse of the traditional school. Although the topics covered range from metaphysics to cosmology and pre-modern science, all of the nine essays echo similar reactions to modern science. Nasr’s main concern, while demonstrating the shortcomings of modern science, aims also at

restoring the connection between human beings and God, the phenomenal and the metaphysical. According to him, the birth of individualism and rationalism with Renaissance humanism held the beginning of the decay of the human being as human. Nietzsche's cry for the "death of God" simply marked the beginning of the death of Man—which can be seen in the contemporary decline of ethics and the environmental crisis to unprecedented tragic levels. Nasr rejects modern science's claim that life began with matter and instead emphasizes the priority of consciousness. Modern science's materialistic worldview, as he put it, "has destroyed the harmonious relation not only between man and God and the spiritual world, but also between man and nature" (226).

The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr should be riveting both for specialized and non-specialized readers. It is illuminating both through Chittick's careful selection and edition of Nasr's work, and through Nasr's sound philosophical arguments. While very few have represented Tradition with the same scrupulous integrity as Nasr, perhaps none has introduced Nasr's encompassing oeuvre with the same degree of accuracy and fidelity as William Chittick does in this book. Students of religion especially should find it engaging, for it raises a central question in contemporary (esp. sociological and anthropological) studies of religion: What is religion and how does one approach it? The book might also be of interest to students of cultural studies who are in the pursuit of a different approach (other than the phenomenological) to questions of the body and performativity.

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