

Nature and Gnosis: The Tawhidic Theosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

By Jerome Klotz

Section Three:

The Metaphysics of Nature in Tradition and Modernism*

While the three modes of gnosis are indeed foundational and constitutive of Nasr's theosophical vision, yet one cannot hope to arrive at any proper grasp of his philosophy of nature, or apprehend its true import for contemporary cosmology and metaphysics, without also attending to his distinctive use of the concept of "tradition", as well as—though only as a "secondary consideration"¹—its relationship to modernism.

Tradition

Contrary to common parlance which tends to view "tradition" as the mere transmitted continuity of a specific set of thoughts or actions, the validity of which is entirely determinable apart from the origin of that transmission or the goal towards which it tends, Nasr speaks of tradition as truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatārs*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.²

*This is the second part of a paper, whose first part was published in volume 46 of *Sacred Web*.

¹ See Peter Samsel, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Critique of Modernism", in *Voices of Three Generations: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohammad H. Faghfoory and Katherine O'Brien (Chicago: Kazi, 2019; hereafter cited as VTG), 201.

² KS, 68.

Tradition therefore has “two elements”: one that is inward or “esoteric”, and another that is outward or “exoteric”.³ The esoteric element of tradition is most closely tied to the level of its primordial unity, the truth that it “always *is*”;⁴ whereas the exoteric element of tradition is, by contrast (though not by contradiction), more closely tied to the level of its perennial manifestations, the truth that it always *recurr*s. As stated above, the Absolutely Real is Infinite such that the expression of Its “All-Possibility” is non-repeating; for being inexhaustible, the diffusion of the Infinite is absolved of all redundancy. And because redundancy is a stranger to the Godhead, the entire hierarchical plane of manifestation is consequently “spiroidal” in its structure, “in the sense that a cycle never returns exactly to the same point as before”, just as “the new spring season is never exactly the previous spring but nevertheless it is a return to spring.”⁵

The same principle applies to tradition. For Nasr, tradition is no redundant “handing down” (*traditio*) of revealed truths whose continuity can be traced entirely within the flux and flow of time, but is instead the transcendent gifting of “a presence which leaves its imprint but is not reducible to that imprint”,⁶ and which therefore, like the conjugal vow, presupposes a “giving back” (*redditio*) which makes the tradition ever new within each unique time and place. Knowledge can therefore only be “handed down” where it is also “bounded up together”; hence the close association of “tradition” with “religion”, whose own etymology can be taken to imply the act of “binding” (from *re-ligare*, meaning “to bind fast” or, in a more nuptial rendering, “to tie the knot”).⁷ Taken together, a tradition is an historical mediation of primordial Truth’s fidelity to Itself—the living out of the marriage between heaven and earth, origin and end, Knower and known. For if “to be” is to be *intelligible*, that is, if being and intelligibility finally converge in a transcendent unity, then the sustained act of their mutual interpenetration, as it occurs within and through time—as a “moving image of eternity” (*Timaieus*, 37c-e)—is

³ ISS, 181.

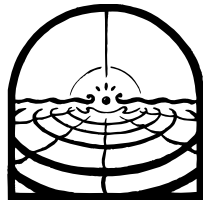
⁴ Ibid.

⁵ NSS, 30.

⁶ KS, 67.

⁷ René Guénon notes the natural link between “tradition” and “religion”, as well as its tragic severing, in his *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Marco Pallis, Arthur Osbourne, and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 62.

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