

# Islamic Surveys: Four Works by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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*Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3. (Summer, 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.  
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THE story of an author's career does not always throw light on his work, yet in this instance it may undoubtedly be said to do so; Seyyed Hossein Nasr through his up-bringing combines to a remarkable degree the spiritual inheritance of East and West.

As scion of a highly esteemed Persian family—the title Seyyed indicates descent from the Prophet—he received an Islamic education, which included learning classical Arabic. His father, who was a doctor in the royal household, died while he was still young and he was sent to school in America, going on later to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he devoted himself to the study of the natural sciences, from an inward urge to "understand the sense of the Universe," as he expressed it later on. Disillusioned through finding himself unable to arrive at an actual world-view from the study of modern natural sciences he transferred to philosophy and it was at Harvard University that he met an outstanding teacher in George Sarton, who was at that time putting the history of the sciences on a new footing. Under his guidance S. H. Nasr became absorbed in the cosmological doctrines of the Middle Ages and here his knowledge of Arabic and Persian as well as of classical European languages stood him in good stead. He returned to Teheran with a Harvard doctorate and here he found a new teacher in Seyyed Muhammad Hussain Tabâtabâ'i, a remarkably gifted representative of the tradition of *hikmah*, a tradition still alive in Iran today, in which metaphysics and cosmology are combined in a single form of sapiential teaching. At this same time he also worked with Henry Corbin, the director of the French Institute in Teheran, on the preparation of a history of Islamic philosophy. Various journeys to other Islamic countries, from Morocco as far as India, brought him in touch with leading representatives of the spiritual tradition. Today S. Hossein Nasr is professor of the philosophy and history of science in the University of Teheran.

*An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1964).

In his preface to this book Professor H. A. R. Gibb says that it puts forward a comparatively uninvestigated and hence unfamiliar view of Islam, about which a majority of modern Muslim rationalists would doubtless say that it is alien to the real Islam: but this is a mistaken view. In point of fact S. Hossein Nasr has successfully shown that the cosmological doctrines in question, which were developed during the period from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, are neither mere Hellenistic heirlooms outwardly adapted to the Islamic faith nor yet first gropings in the direction of the modern natural sciences and therefore now only fit to be dismissed as obsolete and decrepit. What chiefly comes to light in these doctrines is a spiritually based view of the Universe, one which always endeavours to see the whole in the part because from the point of view of these doctrines the Universe itself amounts ultimately to a reflection of the divine Unity. Cosmology in the true sense of the word moreover can only be that and nothing but that. When one comes to think of it, this is true of the real basis of every science, since even modern natural science, which considers itself to be agnostic, tacitly assumes the existence of a necessary relationship between the laws of the Spirit and those ruling over Nature, failing which there could be no such thing as truth at all. However, modern science takes no notice of this assumption, as if once and for all it had relieved the Cartesian division of reality into "spirit" and "matter" of any further concern for whatever goes beyond matter, whereas the Islamic as well as the Christian cosmology sees through the different levels of reality, as it were, with the result that the quantity of things matters less in its eyes than their

quality; and likewise the actual course of natural events signifies less than their permanent archetypes. This also explains why the mode of expression in mediaeval cosmology often baffles the modern reader: he considers it "naive" when really it is profound in its preference for symbols over definitions, and bottomlessly "abstract" when it is merely indicating things which we cannot grasp with our two hands. Mediaeval cosmology can in fact sometimes be described as naive, for how can this be otherwise when it is a question of human thinking? It is never naive however in its essential features. S. Hossein Nasr develops all this exhaustively by means of three celebrated examples: firstly, the *Rasâ'il* (epistles) of the *Ikhwân as-Safâ*, the "Brethren of Purity," an encyclopedia which was published about the year 1,000 by a group of scholars from the region of Basra; secondly, the cosmographical works of al-Bîrûnî (973-1051), the great Persian astronomer and indologist; thirdly, the cosmology of Ibn Sînâ (980-1037), known as Avicenna in Latin, which was also of decisive importance for the development of Christian cosmology: one says "was," yet it could still have this importance to-day in the sense that even modern natural science could find invaluable suggestions within the scheme of ancient cosmology, wherever it is compelled to reach out beyond what can be weighed and counted, as for example in the sphere of psychology or psycho-somatic medicine.

*Three Muslim Sages*. Avicenna—Suhrawardî—Ibn Arabî. (Harvard University Press, 1964).

In this book, which arose out of a course of lectures given at the "Center for the Study of World Religions" in Harvard, our author takes a bold aim towards the horizon of Islamic spirituality, placing three of its loftiest peaks next to one another, as contrasting examples: Avicenna, the most fruitful and still influential representative of the Peripatetic philosophy, Shihâb ad-Din as-Suhrawardî, founder of the school of Illumination (*ishrâq*), in whom philosophical and mystical elements unite to form a single "theosophy," and Muhyi ad-Dîn Ibn Arabî, known as the "Greatest Master" (*ash-shaykh al-akbar*) of the Islamic mystical way.

European scholars tend to emphasize the contrasting features and incompatibilities of the teachings represented by these masters; viewed from another angle more in keeping with Islamic esotericism, these teachings appear however as different aspects of the same Truth, complementary to one another.

To understand this point clearly one has to consider Avicenna not merely as the transmitter of Greek philosophy and natural science, according to the view generally adopted by European scientists. In his case only the sub-structure is to some extent Aristotelian; his ontology, which acts as a spacious dome covering in the whole edifice of learning and drawing it together into Unity, is fashioned anew out of the spirit of Islam. For the Latins Avicenna amounted above all to a means of approach to Aristotle; but as Ibn Sina he showed a way that led on through the Aristotelian *ratio* to mystical knowledge: Ibn Sina's mystical poetry never became known in the West. Moreover, it is not just accidentally and thanks to an erroneous attribution of the Plotinian "theology" to Aristotle that Platonic elements already appear in company with Aristotelian doctrine in the work of Avicenna's forerunner, al-Farabi. It is a great merit of the Islamic philosophers to have succeeded in reconciling the two Greek masters, thanks to the teaching firmly anchored in the Koran on the subject of the universal Spirit, which is reflected in man on different planes, sensual, intellectual and supra-formal.

The bridging of the various planes of knowledge and their arrangement in hierarchical order was described in all its fullness by Suhrawardî (1153-1191). This Persian master, who met his death in prison at Aleppo as a victim of the jealousy of certain doctors of the Law, founded a school of spiritual hermeneutic science by incorporating in the Islamic gnosis both Platonic philosophy and pre-islamic Persian mythology. This school achieved a long succession, especially in Shiite Persia, and is still active today. For Suhrawardî philosophical thought is a kind of propaedeutic, a preparation for a higher form of knowledge which is not in any sense irrational, but supra-rational, employing symbols therefore rather than logical formulae as its supports. For describing the intermediate psychic world that lies between body and spirit Suhrawardî likes to make use of alchemical imagery. Ancient Persian myth comes alive again in his angelology, while his description of the highest vision of God is closely related to the Vedantic doctrine of non-duality (*advaita*) without its being necessary, however, to presuppose any actual foreign influence in his work.

The expression *ishrâq* (=sunrise, illumination), descriptive of Suhrawardî's school, refers to the Koranic symbol of divine light, ("God is the light of Heaven and Earth," Koran, XXIV, 35) which is at one and the same time Being and Knowledge and with reference to which Suhrawardî has said: "It has no need of explanation since one always explains what is obscure with what is evident and nothing is more evident and clearer than light, so that there exists nothing by the help of which it could be explained. All things are in fact revealed by it and have therefore to be explained in relation to it." Thus the divine Light in itself is not incomprehensible because it is hidden, but because it dazzles us with its purity.

The same hierarchy of knowledge is to be found in the works of Muhyi ad-Din Ibn Arabî (1165-1240), the master of Arab descent born in Andalusia and buried in Damascus, whose unbelievably rich body of teachings was destined to have a lasting influence upon the whole of Islamic esotericism and mysticism. In contrast with Suhrawardî Ibn Arabî does not make use of the ancient Persian symbols; he is rooted entirely in the world of Arab ideas, but above all in the Koran, the formulae of which are for him the occasion of profound contemplation.

S. Hossein Nasr rightly lays stress on two aspects of Ibn Arabî 's work; his teaching on the unity of Being (*wahdat al-wudjûd*) and on the complete or universal man (*al-insân al-kâmil*). The first of these two doctrines is often wrongly described as "pantheism"; pantheism means an equating of God and the world, whereas Ibn Arabî's doctrine of unity always safeguards the divine transcendence in the fullest degree. The statement according to which the world is God but God is not the world is perfectly understandable in spite of its paradoxical form. This follows moreover from the Islamic declaration of faith itself; "There is no god but God"; the world has no independent reality, so then it must be in God. It is equally erroneous to describe the metaphysics of an Ibn Arabî as "monism," as happens today frequently, since this expression implies a mental restriction of reality such as would arise if one sought to deny the living manifoldness of existence by means of a merely mental abstraction. To the spiritual vision that finds expression in Ibn Arabî, however, there belongs a clear consciousness of the inexhaustible multiplicity of the states of existence, which are all to be found again in "complete" man as the reflection of the All. The highest unity, in which ultimately all multiplicity is abolished, has nothing to do with unity in the purely mathematical sense of the word, nor is it, for Ibn Arabî, something in any wise attainable through mental abstraction. God is not the object of human understanding, but man can become the vessel of divine self-revelation (*tadjallî*).

As has been said already, the world of Ibn Arabî's thought is grounded essentially in the Koran; at the same time it embraces everything that had to do with spiritual science in his time. Among other things the teaching of Plotinus makes its appearance in Ibn Arabî's work, supplemented and given precision through the divinely revealed teaching and infinitely enriched by parables and images derived from mystical experience.

Like Suhrawardî, and indeed in an even more comprehensive manner, Ibn Arabî was aware of the equivalence of all genuine religions. God cannot reveal Himself to man otherwise than by clothing His truth, limitless in itself, in particular forms; forms, because they have limits, necessarily exclude one another, yet their innermost content is able to be one and the same.

*Islamic Studies*, Essays on Law and Society, the Sciences, Philosophy and Sufism. (Librairie du Liban, Beirut, 1967).

This book by S. Hossein Nasr is the result of a number of lectures which he gave as the guest of various Universities and Institutes in the Near and Middle East. A consideration emerges here that was only touched on incidentally in the books mentioned hitherto, namely concern for the future of the Islamic spiritual heritage in face of the levelling down effect of a type of education based on purely European models; conspicuous in this respect is the chapter entitled "The Pertinence of studying Islamic Philosophy today." S. Hossein Nasr asserts here that certain Orientals, educated along English and French lines, either do not know their own culture at all or else know it merely by the roundabout way of European orientalism. This implies a twofold distortion of perspective, firstly because in this way Islamic spirituality comes to be viewed from the outside instead of from

within, and secondly because European historical research is accustomed to take note of Islamic spiritual life only in view of its historical repercussions on the development of European science: whatever can be dated after Averroes is usually misjudged, as though after him all spiritual activity in the Islamic world had come to a standstill; this prejudice has become firmly established among modernized Muslims. As a matter of fact it is precisely in the sphere of *hikmah*, the wisdom teaching which incorporated the Peripatetic philosophy in Islamic metaphysics, that some of the most important and most comprehensive syntheses were created during the post-mediaeval centuries and on into relatively recent times.

Two of the chapters that follow are devoted to a master of this school living in the 17th century, Sadr ad-Dîn Shîrâzi (Mullâ Sadrâ). His work has become known in Europe firstly through the work of M. Horten and more lately through Henry Corbin. Furthermore it should be noted that the Islamic world of the last few centuries has known some truly outstanding masters both in the realm of traditional philosophy, and still more so in the field of mysticism. What is missing from that world and what people reproach it for lacking, is the kind of individualistic thinking which has in practice estranged Europe from its Christian heritage. Contemporary Europe has preferred the adventure of thinking to spiritual contemplation.

*Ideals and Realities of Islam* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1967).

This fourth book arose out of a series of lectures which S. Hossein Nasr gave in the American University of Beirut, during the 1964-1965 session, where he was the first to occupy the chair of Islamic studies founded by the Agha Khan.

The purpose of this course of lectures, and hence of the book as well, is evidently to provide as comprehensive a survey as possible of the Islamic tradition; here the author has also been successful, so that the work may be recommended most warmly to anyone wishing to arrive at a reliable and inwardly experienced idea of Islam.

The first chapter describes the general character of Islam which, according to its own declaration, is the last of the revealed religions and also at the same time a return to primordial religion. The second deals with the Koran which, as the revealed word of God, plays the same central role in Islam as the earthly manifestation of the Logos in Christianity. The third chapter is concerned with the Prophet as the vessel of the revelation and as "complete man," and also with the prophetic tradition which, next to the Koran, is the chief source of the Islamic way of life. The fourth chapter deals with the *shari'ah*, the divine Law, which is intended to regulate the behaviour of individuals as well as of the community, while the following chapter is devoted to the *tarîqah*, the spiritual path, the "mystical" way that is to say and its Koranic roots. A closing chapter explains the difference between the Sunnite and Shiite traditions.

One would not expect a man like S. Hossein Nasr to describe Islam from the viewpoint of historical relativism, an attitude moreover that never can reach the essence of any religion; on the other hand there is no need for any prospective reader to fear that our author will employ the language of a closed world inaccessible to non-Muslims. He starts out from as wide a horizon as possible and freely invokes other forms of belief for purposes of comparison and always with the deepest reverence. In many instances he leans explicitly upon the book by Frithjof Schuon entitled: "Comprendre l'Islam" (*Understanding Islam*, Allen and Unwin, 1963). That reverence for other religions is something rooted in Islam itself and does not just grow out of "modern broad-mindedness" follows clearly from what has been said already about Sufi masters such as Suhrawardî and Ibn Arabî.

In conclusion the title of one more book by S. Hossein Nasr should also be mentioned: *Science and Civilisation in Islam*. This book, published by Harvard University Press, has appeared quite recently.