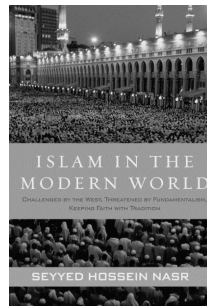


Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr
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Reviewed by Zachary Markwith

In the premodern period, the term “traditional Islam” would have been a pleonasm. Following Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent spread of modernism in most parts of the Muslim world, such is not the case today. Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s definition of traditional Islam is now imperative to distinguish those currents of the religion that remain faithful to the form and spirit of the Qur’an and *Sunnah* or Wont of the Prophet Muhammad, including the intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and artistic principles and heritage of Islam, from those modernist and “fundamentalist” aberrations that more often than not resemble Islam in name alone. In the words of the late Charles Le Gai Eaton:



Who speaks for traditional Islam: the Islam lived for centuries by theologians and jurists, by philosophers and scientists, by artists and poets, by Sufis and simple people of faith throughout the Islamic world during fourteen centuries of Islamic history—the Islam which is in fact still followed by the vast majority of Muslims from the Atlantic to the Pacific? There may be still many who speak privately for this tradition but there are only a few writers and, among these few, Seyyed Hossein Nasr is pre-eminent.¹

¹ William Chittick, ed., *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), front material.

Nasr's expanded volume *Islam in the Modern World*, first published in 1987 as *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, is a veritable summa of traditional Islam—both as a metahistorical ideal and reality that transcends the contingencies of time and space and as a living religion that has flourished for over fourteen centuries to shape the lives and worldviews of diverse Muslim populations from Senegal to Indonesia. In his prologue “What is Traditional Islam?” Nasr provides us with a rich and rigorous definition of traditional Islam, relating it first and foremost to the Supreme Principle and the doctrine of Unity (*al-tawhid*), the Qur'an and *Sunnah* of the Prophet of Islam, including canonical books of *Hadith* or sayings of the Prophet, the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law and classical schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*), the various manifestations of Islamic spirituality, including Sufism (*tasawwuf*), Islamic philosophy (*falsafah/ hikmah*), and Islamic art and architecture, for example. We discover that the various expressions of traditional Islam—including Sunnism and Shī'ism, the schools of Law and Sufism, the unique syntheses of Abū Hāmid Ghazzālī and Mullā Sadrā, or Ottoman and Safavid art and architecture, for example, all grew organically from roots of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* as so many branches of the same tree. Even those forms of heterodoxy and hypocrisy that existed in Muslim lands in the premodern period were contained and mitigated by a general awareness of orthodoxy and the immutable principles of the religion, the influence and presence of exoteric and esoteric scholars, traditional institutions and forms of governance, and an ambience that reflected and gave profound expression to Islam's inner teachings. These aspects of Islam have by no means been entirely eclipsed in the modern period, but they are under assault from both the West and certain quarters in the Muslim world.

Modernist and “fundamentalist” parodies Islam often have more in common with western ideologies, institutions, goals and forms of activism than they do with principles and heritage of Islam. Nasr observes,

...It is remarkable how the so-called fundamentalists share with the Islamic modernists their complete espousal of modern science and technology, indifference to Islamic sacred art, hatred of traditional wisdom and the peace and contemplation associated with the inner life, and many other aspects of traditional Islam. In many ways, Islamic “fundamentalism” and modernism are two sides of the same coin and share much in common on many issues, including a stand against traditional Islam.²

Islamic modernism and “fundamentalism” are both reactions to the diminished social, political and military power of Muslim empires and

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 428.

nations when confronted with the rise and onslaught of western philosophy, science, technology, and military and commercial expansion. Many Muslims and western commentators see this as proof of “what went wrong” with the Muslim world as opposed to what went wrong with the West. Nasr is among the few contemporary Muslims scholars who are informed, discerning and courageous enough to question the worldview and trajectory of the modern West itself—as opposed to simply aping the ideologies and ethos of modernism, including humanism, scientism, rationalism, relativism, socialism, democracy, militarism, and the idea of progress, for example, while simply attaching the adjective “Islamic” to these expressions of modernism to give the veneer of authenticity. In order to regain power and prominence, Muslim modernists and “fundamentalists” betray the principles of their tradition—Divine, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic—and instead adopt secular worldviews and modes of action that depart from both the forms and substance of traditional Islam. Moreover, those in the West should be aware that, despite the existence of pure exoterism (which must be differentiated from the exoteric forms of Islam) among some Muslims in the premodern period—so-called Islamic fundamentalism and its more violent manifestations is more a product of and a reaction to the West and modernism than the Islamic tradition itself.³ It is

³ It was in fact initial support from western governments that gave power and prominence to some of the most well known manifestations of Islamic “fundamentalism,” including Bin Laden, the Taliban, and Wahhābism. Thus, Islamic fundamentalism is as much a product of the West as it is the Muslim world, which is true even where there is no political or military support from the West at the genesis of such a movement because they most often come into being as a reaction to western wars, colonization, occupation or influence. Moreover, the very tactics and technology used by militants in the Muslim world are direct products of the West. By and large, the vast majority of Muslims have demonstrated incredible self-restraint, patience, and reliance upon God and the principles of their religion in the face of open hostility and aggression. Even most Muslim “fundamentalists”—who themselves make up less than 5% of the world’s estimated 1.6 billion Muslims—cannot be considered militants, and among those that can far less can be labeled terrorists. A recent study in fact found that a significantly larger percentage of Americans compared to the Muslim populations surveyed think that attacks in which civilians are targeted are justified—which can also be discovered by counting the civilian deaths among Americans and Muslims through the acts of terrorism and war in recent years. John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), p. 95. For some reason, however, peace-loving Muslims are forced to apologize for the criminals in their societies, while both religious and secular people in the West rarely have to even question the violence that their elected leaders and governments commit in their name around the world. So while we are forced by circumstance to address modernism and “fundamentalism” among Muslims here, it is useful to recall that these aberrations are not confined to any one civilization or religion, and that they in fact began and persist most strongly in the West.

imperative to understand this point because most secularists and non-Muslim believers in the West assume that the modernization of the Muslim world and the diminished role of Islam in the public and private spheres will mitigate extremism, when nothing could be further from the truth. When traditional Islam is understood and practiced, Muslims are required by Islamic Law to protect the lives, property and honor of non-Muslims and all non-combatants; they cultivate knowledge, piety and virtue through following the Qur'an and *Sunnah*; and have access to metaphysical principles through Islamic spirituality, philosophy and art through which they fulfill their entelechy. From honest business practices and healthy homes to the cultivation of poetry and the sciences, traditional Islam connects Muslims to Heaven and communicates a measure of Divine Wisdom, Beauty, Peace and Justice to the faithful through which they can thrive here on earth.

In *Islam in the Modern World*, Nasr surveys various manifestations of Islamic modernism and “fundamentalism” and is careful to offer a nuanced survey of these phenomena, as opposed to a neatly bifurcated image that would divide the Muslim world into categories of good Muslims and bad Muslims. Nasr is acutely aware of the complexities in Muslim countries and even in a single individual were Tradition, modernism and “fundamentalism” all vie for influence. He discusses various forms of Islamic modernism and “fundamentalism,” such as the Salafiyah and Islamic rationalism of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān in India and Muhammad ‘Abduh in Egypt, Wahhābism originating from the teachings of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Arab, Turkish and other forms of nationalism, Pan-Islamism and its relation to Jamāl al-Dīn Astrābādī or al-Afghānī, and various forms of “Islamic” socialism and Marxism found in the Arab world, Pakistan, and Iran. Nasr also discusses those nations and groups that display characteristics of traditional Islam, Islamic modernism and Islamic “fundamentalism,” including the Deoband movement in the Indian subcontinent, Khomeinism in Iran, and the Ikhwān al-Muslimīn or Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other Muslim nations. Moreover, he also analyzes the rise of Islamic messianism or Mahdiyyism, where the aspirations of a number of individuals and groups are centered on the appearance of the Mahdī to redress the domination and injustices Muslims face—some leaders even claiming to be the expected Mahdī himself. While belief in the eventual rise of the Mahdī is based upon

authentic sayings of the Prophet of Islam, the false attribution of this function to this or that leader for the sake of gaining political and social power is among the signs of the times and an impediment to the revival of the Islamic tradition for the greater community.⁴ The solution, for Nasr, is beyond these three responses:

...There is a fourth kind of reality in contemporary Islam...that must be mentioned, especially since it has received practically no attention so far in Western analyses of the contemporary Islamic world. This reality is the revival of the Islamic tradition from within by those who have encountered the modern world fully and who, with complete awareness of the nature of that world and all the religious, philosophical, scientific, and social problems it poses, have returned to the heart of the Islamic tradition to find answers and to revive the Islamic world as a spiritual reality amid the chaos and turmoil created throughout the world by what are called modernism/post-modernism and “fundamentalism.” The theater of action of this group has been not mass meetings or political gatherings, but the hearts and minds of individuals gathered in small circles. For this group, Islam is traditional Islam with its roots sunk in Heaven and its branches spread through a vast world stretching in space from the Atlantic to the Pacific and encompassing a time span of over fourteen centuries.

This group of traditionalists rejects nothing of the Islamic tradition, not its arts, sciences, or philosophy, and certainly not Sufism and the inner teachings, which they consider to be the heart of the whole body of Islam, whose limbs, governed by the *Shari’ah*, are animated by the blood flowing from the heart. For this group, it is Islamic metaphysics that provides answers to problems posed by such modern ideologies and “isms” as rationalism, humanism, materialism, evolutionism, psychologism, and the like. For it, the revival of the Islamic world must come from a revival within Muslims themselves. This group’s idea of reform is not that of the modernists or “fundamentalists,” which always begins with the outward; the latter always wish to reform the world, but never individual human beings themselves. These traditionalists emphasize inner reform of men and women and through them of Islamic society as a whole. Their attitude toward the world, including the modern one, is not that of passive acceptance. They criticize the modern world in light of immutable principles and view it as a canvas, alluring from afar, but shown to be of an illusory nature when examined from close quarters. They stand at the center of Islamic orthodoxy and consider all violent movements that incorporate the worst elements of Western civilization in order to combat that civilization to be a disservice to Islam and below the dignity of God’s last revelation.

This group believes in inner revival (*tajdid*), which is a traditional Islamic concept, and not external reform (*islah*) in its modern sense, which has thus become an alien idea grafted upon the body of Islam. The model for this group is an al-Ghazzālī, an ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, or a Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, not some thirteenth/nineteenth- or fourteenth/twentieth-century

⁴ Nasr also discusses the Mahdī and Mahdīism in relation to the “invisible men” (*rijal al-ghayb*) of Islamic esoterism and more generally to the “Eliatic function.” *Islam in the Modern World*, pp. 116-118. See also, Leo Schaya, “The Eliatic Functon,” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 13, no. 1 and 2, pp. 31-40; and Zachary Markwith, “The Eliatic Function in the Islamic Tradition: Khidr and the Mahdī,” *Sacred Web* 25, pp. 47-74.

leftist revolutionary who simply bears a Muslim name or some self-righteous puritanical reformer or angry “fundamentalist” who is impervious to the inner and intellectual teachings of religion. This group acts without acting, in the sense that its function is more that of knowledge and spiritual presence than of ordinary activism. But it is from this group that there has flowed and continues to flow some of the most profound and religiously significant Islamic responses to the modern world. And it is this group that in the long run will have the deepest effect upon the Islamic community, as has been the case during most of Islamic history.⁵

In addition to the figures mentioned above, Nasr also cites the Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’iri and Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī, both from Algeria, as eminent exemplars of Islamic spirituality who have, through their teachings and presence, catalyzed an inward revival of the hearts of Muslims after the spread of modernism. Throughout the book he lists the names of various other representatives of traditional Islam, including Sufis such as Muhammad al-Tādili of Morocco, Salāmah al-Radī of Egypt, Shams al-‘Urafā’ of Iran, Badī‘ al-Zamān Nūrsī of Turkey, and Shāh Mas‘ūd of Afghanistan; Muslim philosophers including Muhammad Tāhir Tabarsī and ‘Allāmah Tabātabā’i of Iran; influential religious leaders and thinkers such as Muhammad Bāqir al-Sadr and Ayatollah Sīstānī in Iraq; and Muslim artists and architects such as Hasan Fathy and ‘Abd al-Wāhid al-Wakīl of Egypt and Kāmil Khan Mumtāz of Pakistan. Moreover, Nasr makes more explicit reference in the new edition of this volume to the role of the Traditionalist School, and in particular the critical task carried out by René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings—all western Muslims—in reviving Tradition and the Islamic tradition in particular. Nasr writes,

...it is necessary to say a word about the term “tradition” as used here, as in all of my other writings. As used by the Traditionalists, the group that formed around the work of René Guénon that is rooted in the “perennial philosophy,” this term implies both the Sacred as revealed to humanity through revelation and the unfolding and development of that sacred message in the history of the particular human community for which it was destined; it implies both horizontal continuity with the Origin and a vertical connection that relates each moment in the development of the life of any single tradition to the metahistorical Transcendent Reality.⁶

Nasr goes on to relate Tradition to the Islamic terms *al-dīn* or religion, *al-sunnah* or the sacred models of the prophets, *al-silsilah* or the chain

⁵ *Islam in the Modern World*, pp. 39-41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of transmission that connects each generation back to the founder of the religion and through him to God, and *barakah* or “that grace... originating with the revelation.”⁷ Nasr understands the reality of Tradition in the most universal sense, as the common Origin or roots of all revealed religions, as well as the need for particular manifestations of Tradition. Moreover, it was precisely through Guénon’s universal exposition of Tradition—which embraces not only religion as this term is generally employed in the modern West, but in addition metaphysical principles, symbolism, initiatic doctrines and rites, written and oral transmitted knowledge, social institutions and all of the various features of premodern civilizations—that Nasr could recognize these features in Islam and thus provide us with his expansive and penetrating vision of traditional Islam.⁸ For Nasr, a theoretical or nostalgic awareness of Tradition is not sufficient to change our condition and reconnect us to the Supreme Principle, but also a practical commitment to a particular tradition through which Tradition as such or the Primordial Tradition is experienced existentially, as each later manifestation of Tradition relates back to our common historical and metahistorical Origin as so many branches of the same tree.

Nasr’s understanding of traditional Islam stands in stark contrast to those revisionist and reductionist trends defined more generally as Islamic modernism and Islamic “fundamentalism.” Moreover, his own life and corpus is among the most significant indications of the revival of traditional Islam in the contemporary period. Benefiting from the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4. The terms and realities cited above take on particular significance in Nasr’s exposition of traditional Islam. *Al-din* remains religion as such, but it is also the religion revived and inaugurated by the descent of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad beginning in the year 610. For Muslims, the *Sunnah* primarily means the Wont of the Prophet of Islam, while a *silsilah* is an initiatic chain of transmission that connects each generation back to the Prophet, and through him to God. The *barakah* or grace originating with the revelation refers first and foremost to the Qur’anic revelation, despite the fact that all revealed books and prophets remain sacred to Muslims—especially those from the Abrahamic traditions referred to throughout the Qur’an.

⁸ Nasr writes elsewhere, “Tradition...means 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, *avatāras*, 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.” *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 67-68.

Traditionalist perspective and corpus, including an awareness of *sophia perennis* or the universal wisdom at the heart of all religions, the study of Islamic philosophy and Sufism with traditional masters in Iran, North Africa and the West, and advanced training in modern philosophy and science at M.I.T. and Harvard, Nasr has written some of the most significant studies on these subjects to appear in the modern area, including *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *Three Muslim Sages*, *The Garden of Truth*, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, and *Man and Nature*, to name but a few of his over fifty works on Tradition and the Islamic tradition, including Islamic philosophy, science, art and spirituality. He has also devoted important volumes to the Islamic tradition as a whole, including his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* and *The Heart of Islam*, as well as to the study of the primary Islamic sources, including his spiritual biography of the Prophet, *Muhammad: Man of God* and his forthcoming translation, *HarperCollins Study Qur'ān*.

Nasr's *Islam in the Modern World* and his other works cited above are illustrations of how the heart of Islam animates the limbs of the tradition. Since their publication in 1987, his penetrating chapters, "Jihād: Its Spiritual Significance," "Islamic Work Ethics," and "The Male and the Female in the Islamic Perspective," for example, have been essential correctives to the distorted views held on these subjects in the West and parts of the Muslim world. While recognizing and defending the significant function of the *Shari'ah* in defining how Muslims interact with others in society, Nasr lends profound expression to the higher metaphysical and symbolic nature of *jihad*, work, and men and women in Islam, including a call to Muslims to wage the greater *jihad* against their own soul before they try to change the world around them; the relation between prayer and good works, and the equilibrium and complementarity between men and women that is rooted in the Divine Names and Nature and the Universal or Perfect Man (whether male or female), and reflected in the macrocosm.⁹

Nasr also includes an important selection entitled, "Traditional Twelve-Imam Shī'ism and the Reality of Shī'ism Today," wherein he discusses the spiritual and philosophical currents and manifestations of Ithnā 'asha'rī Shī'ism throughout history, from the mourning of Imam

⁹ See also, Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

Husayn during the month of Muharram each year to the more sober “transcendent theosophy” (*al-hikmat al-muta‘aliyah*) of Mullā Sadrā. One of Nasr’s most unique contributions to the study of traditional Islam in our era or any other is his insistence that Sunnism and Shī‘ism are both orthodox manifestations of Islam.¹⁰ He writes elsewhere:

...It can be said that Sunnism and Shī‘ism are two orthodox dimensions of Islam provisionally placed in this tradition to enable collectivities of different psychological and spiritual temperament to become integrated within the Islamic community. Being each an affirmation of the doctrine of Unity, they do not in themselves destroy the profound unity of Islam, whatever their formal differences may be. They are rather two ways of asserting the truth of the *shahadah*, *Lā ilāha illa‘Llah*. They are two streams which originate from the same fountain, which is their unique source, namely, the Qur’anic revelation. And they finally pour into a single sea which is the Divine Unity whose means of realization each contains within itself. To have lived either of them fully is to have lived fully as a Muslim and to have realized that Truth for the sake of whose revelation the Qur’an was made known to men through the Prophet of Islam.¹¹

Nasr also deals extensively with Islamic education, science and philosophy. We discover the challenges of integrating traditional Islamic education with modern education. As an educator at prestigious universities in the Muslim world and the West since 1955, as well as a traditional teacher (*mu‘allim*) of wisdom (*hikmah*) and gnosis (*‘irfān*) outside of academia, Nasr is in a privileged position to assess these challenges and offer solutions based upon principles and the realities on the ground. Though traditional sources, which include the views and writings of the Ikhwān al-Safā’, Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī and Mullā Sadrā, Nasr discusses the epistemological principles and nature of knowledge in Islam, as well as the stages and *raison d’être* of education, which according to the Ikhwān

¹⁰ One can see the beginning of such an awareness in the writings of Nasr’s two greatest teachers: Frithjof Schuon or Shaykh ‘Isā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad, a Sufi master of Sunni inclinations, and ‘Allāmah Tabātabā’ī, a Shī‘ite gnostic and philosopher. Despite recognizing the efficacy of the other branch of Islam, both Schuon and Tabātabā’ī seem to naturally privilege Sunnism or Shī‘ism. Standing upon the shoulders of Schuon and Tabātabā’ī, we see in Nasr’s perspectives and writings an existential awareness and defense of the full legitimacy of both Sunni and Shī‘ite Islam—their distinct historical, political and religious perspectives, as well as the inner nexus between the two branches related to Sufism or *‘irfān*, Islamic philosophy, the doctrine of Unity and the primary Islamic sources. See Frithjof Schuon, “Seeds of a Divergence,” *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd, 1976), pp. 91-110; and ‘Allāmah Tabātabā’ī, “Appearance of Gnosis (Sufism) in Islam,” *Shī‘ite Islam*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 113-115

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2000), pp. 173-174.

are “*taḥdhīb* (refinement), *tathīr* (purification), *tatmīm* (completion), and *takmil* (perfection).”¹² Nasr relates education to not only memory and logical analysis, but more importantly to the spiritual, aesthetic and ethical refinement of the soul and “the perfection of the intellectual faculty,” which he later writes leads to the “the perception (*idrāk*) of God...”¹³ Anyone who has suffered through a modern education knows how far the business of education in the West and increasingly most parts of the East is from the vision and program Nasr and other traditional Muslim educators have exposted. He also writes,

The very process of learning (*ta’lim*) transforms the soul and enables it to undergo the process of going from a state of potentiality to one of actuality. Education, therefore, lies at the heart of religion and is the basic concern of Islam; in its totality, embracing both the *Shari’ah* and the inner way, or *Tariqah*, the religion of Islam itself may be said to consist of a vast program of education for all aspects of the human being from the corporeal to the highest faculties of the soul.¹⁴

In the various chapters on Islamic philosophy and science, Nasr surveys the main figures and intellectual schools that have helped to shape the views of Muslims and their vision of God, the cosmos, the soul and its return to God. He demonstrates the Qur’anic and Muhammadan foundations of *bikmah* and goes on to discuss early Peripatetic (*mashshā’i*) and Ismā’īlī philosophy, the School of Illumination (*al-ishraq*) of Suhrawardī, the theoretical gnosis (*‘irfān-i naẓari*) of Ibn ‘Arabī and other Sufis, and the transcendent theosophy (*al-bikmat al-muta’aliyah*) of Mullā Sadrā. While always beginning from the point of view of first principles or metaphysics, Nasr also recalls the holistic vision and heritage of Islamic cosmology, mathematics, medicine, alchemy, astronomy and other intellectual, natural and arcane sciences. Moreover, there is an additional appendix on philosophy and education entitled, “The Traditional Texts Used in the Persian Madrasahs and the Question of the Revival of Traditional Islamic Education,” which gives modern readers a rare glimpse into the curriculum and syllabi of a living intellectual tradition based on Revelation (Qur’ān), gnosis (*‘irfān*) and reason (*burhān*).

In the next section on Art and Architecture in *Islam in the Modern World* one begins to sense what is it like to live and breathe in an ambiance that reflects paradisaical realities and how the intrusion of modern art and

¹² *Islam in the Modern World*, p. 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

architecture in the Muslim world and all traditional societies is arguably the single most pernicious attack—by both modernists and “fundamentalists”—on Tradition and the souls of men and women. Nasr reminds us that sacred Islamic art is related to the Arabic revelation itself—as Qur’anic recitation and calligraphy are the sonoral and visible forms of the Word of God. He also discusses the mosque, Islamic gardens and homes, prose, poetry, and music, carpets and the art of traditional dress, for example, and how the very principles of the religion and the Presence of the One radiate through these forms as so many symbols that intellectually and existentially communicate Divine archetypes. Nasr also stresses throughout his corpus the significance of both outward and inward beauty or virtue. Thus, the greatest work of art in Islam is the Muslim—and more precisely the *mubsin* or virtuous Muslim—who ennobles the *materia* of his or her soul through its reception of the Qur’an and following spiritual model of the Prophet of Islam. Not surprisingly, most modernists and “fundamentalists” are impervious to the significance of Islamic art and the Divine Presence contained therein and, for example, erect modern skyscrapers next to the Ka’bah in Mecca, while leveling the tombs of Muslim saints. And we are told to believe that the existence of the tombs of saints is a form of idolatry!

Also noteworthy is his appendix “Western Interpreters of the Islamic Tradition” on Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin, who might be characterized as accidental goods of the inherently evil program of Orientalism—which Joseph Lombard observes that “for the most part...served as the hand-maid of the colonialist enterprise, providing its ideological justification.”¹⁵ Yet, as Nasr has pointed out, there was something providential in Massignon’s study of Hallāj and Corbin’s study of Suhrawardī, for example, as Hallāj most clearly reflects the *‘Isawī* or Christic archetype in Islam through his theophanic locutions (*shabhiyyāt*), martyrdom and legacy, while Suhrawardī preserved Greek, Persian and Islamic philosophy through the wisdom of *Isbrāq* or Illumination, which while making use of the rational faculty, takes reason as a starting point on a journey from the material world or the symbolic Occident to the spiritual or angelic world symbolized by the rising of the Sun in the East. Not only are these figures and their perspectives among to most

¹⁵ Joseph Lombard, ed., *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), p. xiii.

profound openings to Islam for western audiences, but Nasr also points out that Massignon and Corbin helped to resuscitate these expressions of Islamic esoterism and philosophy in the Muslim world itself.

Of special interest to readers of *Sacred Web* is the appendix “Islam and Some of the Major Western Traditionalists” on René Guénon (‘Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā), Frithjof Schuon (‘Īsā Nūr al-Dīn Ahmad), Titus Burckhardt (Ibrāhīm ‘Izz al-Dīn), and Martin Lings (Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn). These Muslim traditionalists have offered the most penetrating and far reaching critique of modernism to date based upon both the Islamic sapiential tradition and the universal principles contained at the heart of all religions often referred to as the *sophia perennis*. Nasr demonstrates the impact of the traditionalists and their perspective in both the Islamic world and the West. As one of the last great sages in the first generation of this intellectual fraternity, Nasr offer his readers an insider’s perspective that constitutes the most important biographical source on these figures. While recognizing the universal validity of all revealed religions and the special role that teachings of non-Islamic origin played in the lives and perspectives of Guénon, Schuon, Burckhardt and Lings, Nasr insists that they all formally embraced Islam and followed the spiritual or contemplative path of Sufism because of the vitality and accessibility of Islamic esoterism in the contemporary period. He perceptively observes concerning Schuon:

...There is no doubt that he was a Sufi shaykh, one, however, with an exceptional metaphysical vision and breadth of knowledge, who was a product of the Islamic esoteric tradition. Even his non-Islamic dimensions can be understood to a large extent in light of the fact that Sufism is the esoterism of the last major revelation of humanity, and that, like Islam, whose function it was to integrate all revealed truths that came before it, Sufism contains within itself all the possibilities of esoterism.¹⁶

Thus, we can assert that the Islamic tradition was the fertile soil for the reemergence of the *sophia perennis* in the contemporary period. Moreover, through the discerning eyes of Nasr those from the Muslim world can also reflect upon the special role that some westerners have played in preserving and rearticulating Tradition and the Islamic tradition in particular. In fact, the Muslim response to modernism and the very exposition of traditional Islam in western languages would remain piecemeal without the contributions of the traditionalists. A whole

¹⁶ *Islam in the Modern World*, pp. 389-390.

new generation of scholars and lay believers the world over have now embraced the term and reality traditional Islam and often refer to themselves as traditional Muslims (or the equivalent to traditional in other languages, such as *sumnatī* in Persian). We would argue that this is in large part due to Seyyed Hossein Nasr's introduction of this term and what it implies in his life and work.¹⁷ While there are a number of Muslims in the West and the Islamic world who employ traditional Islam with full awareness of its meaning, this is not always the case. One can only hope that those Muslims who make use of it, yet share characteristics with both traditional Muslims and Islamic "fundamentalists" will explore the more universal dimensions and openings of traditional Islam, such as Sufism, Islamic philosophy, and sacred and traditional Islamic art, as well as a more tolerant and judicious treatment of non-Muslims and

¹⁷ Nasr has influenced and trained several generations of scholars and intellectuals from the West and the Muslim world who have expounded the principles and manifestations of traditional Islam in their work, including William Chittick, Sachiko Murata, James Morris, Gholām Rezā A'vānī, Osman Bakar, Zailan Moris, David Dakake, Joseph Lombard, Ibrahim Kalin, Walid El-Ansari, and Caner Dagli, for example. A number of leading Muslim scholars from the West also first encountered Islam through the writings of the traditionalists, including Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, despite not fully accepting their views on other religions. Yusuf writes, "I remember purchasing a small metaphysical treatise by an author with a foreign name way back in 1976 as I was browsing the shelves in a small spiritual bookstore located amidst a beautiful garden in Ojai, California. The title was *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis*, and the author was Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn [Martin Lings]. At the time, I knew nothing of Islam let alone who the author was, yet the title intrigued me. It was, in essence, what I was searching for—certainty...my curiosity had been piqued and shortly thereafter, in a life-altering transaction, I purchased a Qur'an and began to read a very personal revelation that would compel me to convert to the religion of Islam." Hamza Yusuf, "A Gentle Soul," in Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), pp. 112-113. Yusuf writes elsewhere, "In a time when religions suffer greatly from a lack of articulate and reasonable spokespersons, believers from any tradition who know Dr. Nasr's work are able to raise their heads high when his name is mentioned and say, 'He makes us all proud to be people of faith.' I have been reading Dr. Nasr for over twenty years and his intelligence, prescience, and relevance astound me still." *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, front material. Keller also writes in his translation *Reliance of the Traveller*, "[Seyyed Hossein Nasr] is the author of a number of works that are among the best available in English on the relevance of traditional Islamic sciences and mystical disciples to the situation of modern man, including *Ideals and Realities of Islam, Man and Nature, Islamic Science: an Illustrated Study*, and *Sufi Essays*. The translator is indebted to his writings for being among the reasons he became a Muslim." Ahmad ibn Naqīb al-Misrī, *Reliance of the Traveller* ('*Umdat al-sālik*'), trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville: MD: Amana Publications, 1994) p. 1095. It should be noted that while Keller has written against some of the views of Guénon, Schuon and the traditionalists, Yusuf has shown greater sympathy for other religions in recent years. See, for example, his essay, "Buddha in the Qur'an?" in Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), pp. 113-136.

other revealed religions. Traditional Muslims, especially the Sufis and philosophers, going back to the Prophet Muhammad himself did not throw around invectives at Jews and Christians as routinely as some Muslims do today, which despite being directly related to western colonization and wars in the Muslim world, is a departure from both the spirit and form of Islam. For the most part, our ancestors were more accepting of the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*) and often more conversant in other forms of wisdom (*hikmah*), including the Greek and Persian philosophical heritages, the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel, and even aspects of the Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese traditions.¹⁸ Due to the rise of globalization and relativism and the break down of those barriers that once divided most religious communities, an awareness of the formal diversity and transcendent unity of the revealed religions is now imperative for non-Muslims and Muslims alike to remain faithful to their own tradition and respect the traditions of others.

With so many so-called experts speaking and writing about Islam, the Muslim world and its relation to the West, Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *Islam in the Modern World* is essential to understand the complexities in both the Muslim world and the West. Through reading this fine work one begins to see the challenges and opportunities that confront us through the lucid vision of a philosopher who is an isthmus between both worlds. One hopes that more spiritual seekers, believers, educators, artists, journalists and policymakers in the Muslim world and the West will avail themselves of this volume and the wisdom contained therein.

¹⁸ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam and the Encounter of Religions,” *Sufi Essays* (Chicago, IL: ABC International Group, Inc., 1999), pp. 123-151.