

'The Dearest Freshness Deep Down Things': The Relevance of the Sacred in our Lives

By M. Ali Lakhani

The following is the text of the Opening Address at the Sacred Web Conference 2014, on the theme of 'Rediscovering the Sacred in our Lives and in our Times'.

Welcome to Vancouver and to the Sacred Web Conference of 2014. The purpose of this conference is twofold. Firstly, it is to remind ourselves of the importance of the Sacred. In view of the secularist drift in society through which religion has come under attack both from without and from within, it is important to remind ourselves of what is integral to religion, the dimension of the Sacred, and to rediscover it. That is the main focus of this conference. Secondly, we would like to pay tribute to Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. There is no person that I can think of better than Dr. Nasr to speak to us about the Sacred. Like me, many who are present here today will have first encountered Dr. Nasr through his writings, and I am sure you will agree with me that his works are imbued with the fragrance of the Sacred. This conference is therefore, in part, a tribute to Dr. Nasr to mark his recent 80th birthday.

Turning to the main theme of the conference, I stated that religion has been under attack both from without and from within and I just want to expand on that a bit. When the 2006 Sacred Web Conference was held, Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith*, had already been published and had gained some traction in Western (particularly North American) society. It propagated a thesis that had been around for a long time: that religion is dead, that God is dead, and that faith too is dead. And just before the 2006 conference, Sam Harris had responded to his critics

by publishing *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Shortly after that Richard Dawkins published his book with the notorious title *The God Delusion* which then spawned a lot of responses, for example, David Berlinsky's *The Devil's Delusion*, and there were other responses too, presenting 'The Case for God', as, for example, Karen Armstrong's book by that title indicates.

Along with these 'intellectual' debates about faith in God and questions about the relevance and value of religion in our lives, we have also been faced with certain events happening in the world at large, in politics and society, that have tarnished the image of religion, and particularly, of Islam, as illustrated by the fact that the term 'Muslim' is still often used in the media in conjunction with the word 'fundamentalist'. This has been a common association, a sad association, and it is the kind of association that has contributed to the view that is expressed in the subtitle of the late Christopher Hitchens' ill-titled book, *God is not Great*—the view that 'Religion Poisons Everything'.

Apart from such external attacks on religion, religion has also been beset by challenges from within. This has occurred in two ways: on the one hand, there are those whom I would call the "homogenizers" that is, the reductionists who want to impose a particular uniform on religion, and to say that "if you don't follow 'our way' then you're not a member of 'our club'", and in some cases those who hold this view also resort to violence to impose their views on others; and then there are those whom I would call the "diluters", the relativists who have made religion a matter of their personal whims. Both these groups, where they are Muslims, have in fact forgotten the two relevant Qur'anic precepts: in the case of the "homogenizers", that there is no compulsion in religion (see Qur'an, 2:256), and in the case of the "diluters", that to stray from the True Path is to follow one's vain desires (see Qur'an, 45:23).

In all these cases, whether the attacks on religion were external or internal, and whether they came from the homogenizers or the diluters or the secularists, the attacks fuelled each other in a reactionary sense. Lost in all of this reaction was the sense of the Centre, the sense of the Sacred. Caught in the vicissitudes of our times, it is the Sacred that we need to rediscover, the sacred Norm that constitutes the criterion of objectivity by which we can regain the Equilibrium in our lives.

So what exactly is the Sacred? The term 'sacred' is related to the word

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