

Editorial: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Occidental Exile

By M. Ali Lakhani

Islam began in exile and will end in exile.
And blessed are those who are in exile.

(A *badith* of the Prophet Muhammad)

I am a prisoner in the land of the Occident.

(Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, *Recital of the Occidental Exile*)

For almost four decades following the Iranian revolution of 1979, the polymath, sage and scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, has lived in the West, away from his native Iran, from the oriental land of his illustrious forebears and traditional teachers, and from the soil of that great *irfani* and literary heritage which has spiritually and intellectually nurtured and nourished him.

In a poem penned in 1997, titled 'Occidental Exile', Nasr wrote of his exile from the East, both literally and figuratively. In it he states that he has been 'exiled from my land of birth,/ From her exalted peaks and vast deserts,/ From the vivid colors of all that grows from her soil,/ From her azure bright skies,/ Exiled in the occident of this world'. And he views this geographical exile as a symbol of the human condition of separation from its spiritual homeland, 'That Orient we carry in our hearts/ At that center which is the seat of the All-Merciful,/ Our very core, yet beyond our daily reach'.

On the mundane level, Nasr's own trajectory has led him from a traditional education as a child in Iran to a modern academic education in America. There, while studying physics at M.I.T., he experienced a profound metaphysical disorientation and, through a process of inner search prompted in part by a famous encounter with Bertrand Russell (in which the latter reportedly opined that physics did not concern itself with the *nature* of physical reality *per se* but with mathematical structures), he became convinced that the positivist foundations of modern science could not yield answers to the central questions of human existence: of the true nature of reality, identity, purpose and meaning. Later, while at Harvard, he studied traditional philosophy and was introduced by his professor, Giorgio di Santillana, to the writings of René Guénon and thence to the writings of the perennialist school. During this period, Nasr met many of the perennialists with whom he is now associated, in particular Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, who were his spiritual and intellectual mentors. He also embraced Sufism through the Darqawi Shadhili *tariqa* associated with the Algerian saint, Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi. His thirst for gnosis led him to return to his Eastern homeland, eager to study Muslim metaphysics, which he did among some of its great exponents including Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai. As well, he became schooled in Islamic philosophy and intellectual sciences by luminaries such as Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Assar and Sayyid Abul-Hasan Qazwini. While in Iran, Nasr pioneered major educational reforms in his homeland to draw upon its Islamic heritage in the humanities, particularly philosophy, and the intellectual sciences, and he was responsible for training many students, both from Iran and abroad. Notably during this period, Nasr was asked by the Empress, Farah Pahlavi, to head The Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and, under her patronage, he assembled there an array of influential scholars, including Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu. The events of 1979 forced Nasr into exile in the West, where his numerous accomplishments — which include his delivery of the celebrated Gifford Lectures (the basis of his seminal text, *Knowledge and the Sacred*) and his induction into the elite *Library of Living Philosophers*, among many other achievements — have brought him recognition, while not resolving his status of occidental exile referred to in his eponymous poem. Referencing this status and its effect on his intellectual life, Nasr has stated,

I have sought to live the philosophical life in the Platonic sense of being concerned with *noesis*, inner purification, interiorization, and contemplation of the supernal realities with an even greater intensity amidst a most active intellectual and academic life, and, irrespective of the forced uprooting of my life at the mid-stream of my earthly existence and continuous sense of nostalgia for the homeland from which I have become exiled.

As his poem makes clear, this nostalgia is not merely nostalgia for his native homeland but for its spiritual reality and ambience. He has noted,

The last thing I have ever spoken of is romantic nostalgia for the past. My nostalgia has always been for that spiritual reality residing at the center of man's being, that eternal home from which we have become exiled.

In addition to referencing his mundane status as an occidental exile, Nasr's poem also addresses a broader theme of spiritual exile found in the teachings of the Sufis, which is related to the perennial theme of the separation of the soul from the Spirit and its longing for return to its true abode of Light — 'to that Center,/To our real land of birth'. Nasr is drawing here on a narratology and symbolism found, for example, in the writings of Sufi masters such as Avicenna (particularly in the *Recital of Hayy ibn Yaqzan*), and Suhrawardi (in his response to Avicenna, in the *Recital of the Occidental Exile*), whose visionary allegories have been explicated by Nasr's colleagues, scholars such as Henry Corbin and Annemarie Schimmel, and by Nasr himself. In their texts, the terms 'Orient' and 'Occident' are used in more than a literal sense. Nasr is drawing on an *isbraqi* terminology which associates the 'Orient' with Light, the supernal Sun that is the Source of Being, and the term 'Occident' with Darkness, or non-Being. The Arabic term, *maghreb*, which denotes the 'Occident', etymologically connotes distance, separation, a place of darkness associated with the setting of the Sun — all encompassed within the symbolism of the West. The Occident is therefore related to opacity and ignorance — to the metaphysical veiling of the earth-bound soul who, imprisoned in the 'cosmic crypt' (often symbolized by the image of a dungeon or a well, as in Suhrawardi's visionary tale), has forgotten her spiritual Origin within the Abode of Light.

This is the occidental exile of the human condition, a tenebrous state which Nasr speaks of in his poem, asking:

But is not this domain of transience,
This world of birth and death,
Of shadows cast upon the cascades of light
Itself the accident, whether it be in East or West,
Of that Orient which is light pure,
Unadulterated by the imperfections of earthly life?
It is from *that* world that we are all exiled,
It is that world from which we all hail
And to *that* world that we must return,
Return after our earthly journey's end.

The earthly transience of existence is itself an aspect of the Absolute, the domain of its origin and subsistence — for earthly shadows point to the reality of celestial light. It is what Corbin refers to as 'the Oriental hidden under the Occidental disguise of the common condition'. It is in this sense that, as the *hadith* in the epigraph observes, those who are aware of being in exile are blessed — for they are thereby aware of their true spiritual homeland and of the mystic pilgrim's imperative of returning to *that* world.

As Corbin has noted, the awareness of the soul's status as a spiritual exile is the basis for seeing the world as the *Imago Templi* rather than as a purely immanent, mechanistic, material, and disenchanting world. As Avicenna and Suhrawardi explain, the soul is now aware of cosmic verticality, of the tower that ascends from the well or crypt of the Temple to its ramparts and to the luminous sky and its illuminating Source beyond. The *Imago Templi* is present in the soul's 'imaginal' consciousness, the ontological threshold that is 'the meeting-place of the two seas'. The soul now has an 'orientation' — to the Abode of Light — and her angelic intellect, or Guide, urges her to ascend.

Explaining the cosmology involved, Nasr states,

The Essence of the First Absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby it is manifested and it brings all things into existence, giving life to them by its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the Light of His essence and all beauty and perfection are the gift of His bounty, and to attain fully to this illumination is salvation.

The soul, encased in flesh and the encrustations of psychic matter, seeks deliverance from her exile, from her terrestrial prison, and longs

for her return to her original celestial abode, the domain of felicity and peace. Referring to the soul's miserable state of imprisonment, Nasr states,

The soul of man is caught as a prisoner in the darkness of matter and must free itself in order to return to the world of lights from which the soul of man originally descended. But in order to accomplish this difficult feat and be delivered from his "Occidental" exile he must find a Guide who will orient him in the cosmos and lead him to his ultimate salvation.

How is this orientation — where the Guide or Awakener directs the soul towards the spiritual 'Orient', the Source of Light — to be accomplished? Corbin outlines the process:

In short, it is a question of perceiving, of bringing out, the hidden depth of man, his *batin*, his authentic soul, and of reducing, causing the disappearance of, the apparent, the *zahir*, the whole apparatus of faculties and powers, and of appearances secreted by those powers, that envelop the soul and turn it from that for which it is made.

It is by initiation into the archangelic Forms of Light, and through spiritual disciplines by which the soul detaches herself from the material domain, that the soul ascends in her spiritual journey, guided by her own angelic intellect, her Fravarti or celestial archetype of Being, which transcends her sublunary 'personality'. Through this angelic faculty, as the soul ascends from darkness to Light, from the cosmic crypt to the Source of Light, she perceives all things as theophany, as metaphysically transparent to transcendence. This is the true Orient, 'Our very core, yet beyond our daily reach' without the initiation, guidance, and disciplining of 'the wayward soul'. Referring to this destination of Light ('That Orient we carry in our hearts'), Nasr's poem now continues,

That Orient we carry in our hearts
At that center which is the seat of the All-Merciful,
Our very core, yet beyond our daily reach
Until we turn inward the wayward soul
And break the shell of our hearts
Hardened by the march of forgetfulness through time.

The ascent is 'inward'. The soul's reorientation is a turn 'to the right', upward and inward to its cardinal center — away from the soul's 'forget-

fulness through time' to the metaphysical remembrance (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:152) of her own spiritual nature, through *anamnesis*, invocation (*dhikr*) and the witnessing of the Light of the Divine Countenance even in the abode of shadows, in testimony of the Divine Lordship (*shabada* — in conformity with the Covenant of Alast, *Al-Araf*, 7:172).

In a private conversation with this writer during the Sacred Web Conference of 2014, Nasr had commented that the sword of gnosis required continual sharpening through the discipline of prayer. The comment encapsulates his thesis in the Gifford Lectures that knowledge is ontological (or, in Schuon's famous phrase, knowledge must wound our nature, as the plough wounds the soil) and reflects his understanding of the vital relationship between doctrine and praxis. Prayer is the effective means by which man is radially connected to 'that center which is the seat of the All-Merciful' — to the Light of Being that radiates as theophany from its Transcendent Source. It is the soul's awareness of the *Imago Templi*, of the vertical order spanning from the castle's dungeon and crypt to its celestial ramparts and beyond — from cosmic darkness and non-Being to Light and Being through to its Source Beyond-Being — which is so crucial to her ascent. To understand one's condition as an occidental exile is to perceive the architecture and ambience of the Temple. It is to awaken, by faith, initiation and the grace of angelic guidance, to the Way — of detaching virtue, and integrating beauty and contemplative prayer. As Corbin pithily states, 'there is no contemplation without the Temple'.

The awareness of the *Imago Templi* is the soul's recognition of her adequacy for salvation in the abode of the All-Merciful, the luminous Orient of Light, beyond the infernal world of ignorance, darkness and material solidification. Nasr's poem on his occidental exile therefore ends on a note of mystic joy founded in faith. Recalling the *hadith* of the Blessed Prophet, and also echoing the Sufi adage about being 'in the world, but not of it', Nasr states: 'I live in exile but in joy of being exiled from the world'.

For did not the Blessed Prophet utter
'Happy are those who are in exile in this world?'
Sensing as they do the home to which they belong,
The luminous Orient of all existence is ours,
Joyous in the thought of their homecoming.