

# A Loss of a Sense of the Sacred: The Reception of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Views among Modernist Intellectuals and Traditional Clergy in Iran<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

**S**eyyed Hossein Nasr has been living outside Iran and in the West since a few months before the revolution of 1978-1979. Despite his physical absence from his homeland, however, intellectually he has been continuously present there. Without exaggeration, no other thinker, Iranian or non-Iranian has ever received the degree of attention he has in post revolutionary Iran. No other scholar's works have been translated into Persian and gone through as many editions as his writings.

Attention to Nasr's writing started almost immediately after the initial victory of the revolution, first in political circles like Nehzat-i Azadi-ye Iran whose leader, Mehdi Bazargan, inspired by Nasr's *Science and Civilization in Islam*, published a new edition of his book titled *Religion and Civilization (Din va Tamaddon)*<sup>2</sup> followed by an article by Lutfullah Maythami, in which he analyzed Nasr's Islamic views from a class-based approach. After the consolidation of the Islamic government and especially after the end of war with Iraq in 1988 Nasr's presence became even stronger and has continued to remain so until the present time as is demonstrated in the translation of most of his books into

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the Sacred Web Conference in Vancouver-Canada, (April 26-27, 2014). Special thanks are due to Mr. Ali Lakhani for his kind invitation and hospitality during the conference.

<sup>2</sup> Mehdi Bazargan, *Din va Tamaddon*, Tehran: Enteshar Publishers, 1361/1982.

Persian, and many interviews by newspapers and Iran National radio and Television stations. In addition, several doctoral dissertations and numerous Master's degree theses have been written on different aspects of his thought at Tehran University as well as several seminaries in Qom and Mashhad. A documentary and a festschrift are in the process of production in Tehran.<sup>3</sup> The interesting point is that Nasr has found many readers not only among the educated classes who have deep interest in religion and who do not adhere to clerical interpretation of Islam, but more importantly, within the different echelons of clerical community in Qom, Mashhad, Tehran, Isfahan, and other important religious and intellectual circles. The question to be asked here is why, in an Islamic Republic where many members of the Shi'a clergy have been writing numerous books and treatises on subjects related to Islam, has Seyyed Hossein Nasr received this degree of attention?

The answer to this question must be sought bearing in mind numerous currents of thought in post-revolutionary Iranian society that included different interpretations of Islam, secular ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, and the encounter between modernity and tradition. None of these currents, however, were able to respond individually to the intellectual, religious, and spiritual needs of a society the majority of whose population was very young and in search of the meaning of life. Although the revolution placed Islam and Shi'ism at the center of Iranian society and established the authority of Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini and the Shi'a clergy, it also created a fertile ground for the widespread acceptance of other readings of Islam in general, and of Shi'ism in particular.

The encounter between modernity and tradition in Iran during the twentieth century resulted in the loss of the sense of the Sacred among some echelons of modern educated classes and in diluting it among others. However, the need for the Sacred did not disappear in the society and despite a temporary triumph of modernity over tradition and extensive modernization and secularization, Iran's society remained deeply religious. The case of Iran indeed defies the widely held belief that modernization undermines religion and destroys religious institutions once and for all. Modernization in Iran only temporarily weakened

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<sup>3</sup> Reza Dadkhah is the editor of the festschrift and producer of a documentary on Nasr's life and thought to be released in 2015.

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