

# On the Science of the Soul

## A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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*ABSTRACT:* The monopolistic tendency of modern science in asserting itself as the exclusive interpreter of the human psyche or mind through its psychology does so while negating the most crucial dimension that makes it a complete psychology, the metaphysical order as is found across the world in all times and places. The reductionistic turn of modern Western psychology away from its metaphysical roots has deformed the original “science of the soul” rendering it null and void. That spirituality and metaphysics have been marginalized and deemed irrelevant in modern science was assumed to be the logical course of progress. Ironically, however, their fundamental absence is the reason contemporary psychology is in disarray. Numerous individuals may see this as preposterous and think that to suggest this is to turn back the clock to the dark ages of knowledge. However, if psychology is returned to its origin in metaphysics, sacred science, and spiritual principles, it can again become worthy of being called a “science of the soul.” This interview with Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, on the discipline of psychology explores the original meaning of the “science of the soul” as it is understood across the diverse cultures of the world.

*Keywords:* metaphysics, epistemological pluralism, psychology, human diversity, perennial philosophy, perennial psychology

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) is University Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University, in Washington, DC. Professor Nasr was born in Tehran into a family of distinguished scholars and physicians. He received his early education in Iran, and completed his undergraduate degree in Physics and Mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Nasr then studied Geology and Geophysics, and completed his PhD in the History of Science and Philosophy, at Harvard University. He began his illustrious teaching career in 1955 when he was still a young doctoral student at Harvard University. Over the years, he has taught and trained numerous students from different parts of the world, many of whom have become important and prominent scholars in their fields of study, including scholars such as Laleh Bakhtiar (1938–2020), William C. Chittick, Sachiko Murata, Gholam Reza Aavani, Ibrahim Kalin, Caner Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lombard, Waleed El-Ansary, Oludamini Ogunnaike, Yusuf Casewit, Mohammed Rustom, Tarik M. Quadir, David Dakake, Muhammad U. Faruque, and Fuad S. Naeem.

Professor Nasr is one of the most important scholars of Islam and comparative religion in the world today, and is recognized among the foremost living exponents of the perennial philosophy. He was instrumental in founding the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy (now the Iranian Institute of Philosophy)

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The endnotes and references were created by the author/interviewer.

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in 1974, which drew many Iranian and foreign scholars from diverse parts of the world who later became distinguished specialists in their fields. It attracted notable figures such as Henry Corbin (1903–1978), Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993), and William C. Chittick (b. 1943). In 1984, the Foundation for Traditional Studies, of which Professor Nasr is the president, was created. It is the publisher of *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* and was established to disseminate traditional thought as found in the world's religions and mystical dimensions. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Faculty of Theology of Uppsala University in Sweden (1977) and was the first Muslim and first non-Western scholar to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh (1981). In 1999, he was chosen to be the first Muslim scholar to receive the Templeton Religion and Science Course Award. Professor Nasr has been included in the Library of Living Philosophers and is listed as one of the world's "500 Most Influential Muslims"; he is the author of over fifty books and five hundred articles, which have been translated into many languages. Some of his highly regarded titles include: *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964); *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (1966); *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (1968); *Sufi Essays* (1972); *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981); *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (1987); *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993); and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996). Nasr is the editor-in-chief of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (2015) and a renowned intellectual figure both in the West and the Islamic world. He is a much sought-after speaker at academic conferences, university seminars and public lectures, as well as appearing on many radio and television programs in his area of expertise.

This interview was conducted in an effort to bring awareness to the metaphysical roots of the discipline of psychology in order to restore the "science of the soul" as it has been known across the diverse cultures of the world since time immemorial. It is the framework of the perennial philosophy and its psychology that is needed in the present-day to resolve the methodological dilemma as to how to straddle the intersection between psychology, culture, religion, and spirituality without confusing and reducing them. The power of this framework is illustrated, for example, in the work of Abraham H. Maslow (1908–1970), a pioneer within two "forces" of modern psychology – humanistic and transpersonal. The first sought to reclaim the personhood from the dehumanized shibboleths of behaviorism and psychoanalysis, and the second aimed to reclaim the role of the sacred within the discipline. It was in Maslow's exposure to the perennial philosophy that he found a multidimensional model to support an epistemological pluralism informed by human diversity, its knowledge systems, and the religious and spiritual traditions of the world (Maslow, 1968, 1994).

Huston Smith (1919–2016), doyen in the field of comparative religion, needs no introduction to the readers of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, as he was closely involved with the advancement of humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Bendeck Sotillos, 2013a). He was invited on numerous occasions to be a keynote speaker at conferences on these subjects and received an honorary doctorate from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. He was on the editorial board of both the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*.

Professor Smith has published many articles and has also contributed essays to a variety of anthologies edited by key authors in these fields (see endnote 1).

What may be less known to readers of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* is that Professor Nasr was not only a close friend of Huston Smith, but also a mentor of his. Smith was one of the founders and the vice-president of the Foundation for Traditional Studies. Smith was introduced to the perennial philosophy through Aldous Huxley's (1894–1963) popular anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944), and this perspective became the mainstay of his intellectual outlook (Bendeck Sotillos, 2017). Countless individuals had not only encountered the study of the world's religions through Huston Smith, but were introduced to the writings of perennialist authors such as René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), as well as others such as Martin Lings (1909–2005), Leo Schaya (1916–1985), Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000), Marco Pallis (1895–1989), Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005), William Stoddart (b. 1925), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

Smith's essay in the *Library of Living Philosophers* series entitled "Nasr's Defense of the Perennial Philosophy," clearly affirms a shared intellectual footing with Professor Nasr, as well as an undeniable affirmation of the perennial philosophy: "I [Huston Smith] am the one who is closest to Professor Nasr's philosophical position, most importantly his endorsement of the perennial philosophy" (Smith, 2001, p. 139). Smith recognized Nasr's book *Knowledge and the Sacred*, which was based on his Gifford Lectures, as "one of the most important books of the twentieth century" (Smith, 2007, p. vii).

For individuals unfamiliar with his work, Nasr has defined the perennial philosophy as follows:

A knowledge which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles. This knowledge which is available to the intellect is, moreover, contained at the heart of all religions or traditions, and its realization and attainment is possible only through those traditions and by means of methods, rites, symbols, images and other means sanctified by the message from Heaven or the Divine which gives birth to each tradition. (1993, p. 54)

Nasr also elucidates how the perennial philosophy is intimately connected to metaphysics and embraces other disciplines, including psychology or the "science of the soul":

The *philosophia perennis* possesses branches and ramifications pertaining to cosmology, anthropology, art and other disciplines, but at its heart lies pure metaphysics, if this latter term is understood...as the science of Ultimate Reality, as a *scientia sacra* not to be confused with the subject bearing the name metaphysics in postmedieval Western philosophy. (p. 54)

The following conversation with Professor Nasr was conducted on July 18th, 2020.

**Samuel Bendeck Sotillos:** Professor Nasr, you have been a staunch critic of modern psychology. As you have pointed out, psychology as it is known today stands in radical contrast to how it was understood across the diverse societies and civilizations in its ancient and original sense as the “science of the soul.” Through a trajectory spanning several centuries with the developments of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment project, psychology, or the “science of the soul,” has, in your opinion, become gradually disfigured, fragmented, and turned upside-down. Can you please speak to the paradoxical and problematic situation that what we call psychology in the present day perhaps, in reality, is not psychology at all?

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr:** First of all, let me start with the term itself. We have in traditional writings in Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism what could be translated as “psychology” in the sense that is logos/science of the psyche. The way that the term “psychology” has been transformed in the last few centuries in the West has resulted in modern psychology. There is, however, really nothing that corresponds to it in traditional civilizations.

From the point of view of tradition [see endnote 2], modern psychology is an illegitimate use of what is called knowledge of the psyche in order to explain something which it cannot explain. In principle, to understand anything you have to comprehend it. This is what “comprehension” means; the very word “comprehension” means “to encompass.” So, only the greater can know the lesser.

By what means are you able to know the psyche if you do not believe that there is a higher level of reality in the human being than the psyche? This is the great paradox of modern psychology and that is why it discovers certain things – there is no doubt about that – yet it cannot be considered to be a legitimate “science of the soul” because there is no legitimate “science of the soul” without understanding the levels and hierarchy of being. The fact is that the soul is not an abstraction or simply acting molecules on the one hand, or simply a substance cut off from higher levels of reality on the other. It is actually one of several levels of reality, and it interacts both with what is below it – that is, the *corpus* or body – and also with what is higher than it, which is the Spirit.

The greatest mistake of modern psychology is to confuse the *Pneuma* and the *psyche*, the Spirit and the psyche, the *Spiritus* and *anima*, which we had in classical medieval Christianity, and also in Greek and Islamic thought.

**SBS:** A serious issue that contemporary psychology seems to need to come to terms with is its unchecked hegemonic and totalitarian position that there is no psychology except for that of modern Western psychology. It refuses to acknowledge that modern Western psychology has never been and cannot be a neutral or value-free discipline and that there are many psychologies connected to the diverse human collectivities and their religious traditions. It appears that the time has come for the decolonization of psychology or the “science of the soul.” Could you please weigh in on this pressing and vital matter (see endnote 3)?

**SHN:** What you say is to some extent correct, but is not completely correct, because in the last few decades one of the events that has taken place is that there has been an attempted revival of traditional psychologies in non-Western societies. You now have people in India, Hindus who practice Hindu psychology; you have it in the Islamic world and elsewhere, even to some extent in the West. So, it is not completely true, although it is to a large extent true. I accept that.

There is part of psychology that can be taught and practiced in relation to medicine, in relation to the elements and forces of the body, and in relation to the body and the psyche, and there are people with mental disorders, who can be treated in relation to psychophysical elements of the human being. There is a place for some aspects of modern psychology if it were to accept its own limitations, for it to treat certain forms of mental illness. I have some of my own students and disciples who sometimes are in clinical need of a psychologist or therapist and I recommend that they obtain this support. The trouble is that even in that case most of the Western psychologists are either agnostic or atheist at least when it comes to the practice of psychology and they operate in a world in which the reality of the Spirit, which in fact determines the nature of the soul in many ways and how it acts and how it responds, is absent [see endnote 4]. So, we are in a very difficult situation.

The spread of Western psychology globally is very unfortunate. Some psychologists, including Western psychologists, have realized that in contrast to Western physics, where the specific weight of sodium is the same in Paris and Beijing, in the field of psychology, the religious, spiritual, psychological, cultural elements of a particular civilization cause this science to not be the same everywhere, as it is applied in different worlds. Certain principles might be the same, but their applications are not always the same.

Therefore, there is no one single science of psychology like there is one single quantum mechanics. I do not even accept that there is one single physics. In many of my writings, I discuss this issue: there are different ways of looking at the physical world, but on a certain level one can teach electromagnetic theory and apply it whether you are in Delhi or Beijing, Tehran, Paris, or New York, and through that science and its application you are able to generate electricity and light in your house. That you can do, but in the field of psychology, it is very different.

One of the good events that has occurred in fact has a lot to do with the introduction of certain traditional writings on the “science of the soul” such as the famous essay of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology” [1977], which has awakened many people in both Western and non-Western cultures to the very rich psychological traditions that exist, but of which many Western contemporaries are unaware.

I have had personal experience of many Persians – I am a Persian myself – going to Western psychologists with problems that any Persian doctor, even without being a specialist would realize are culturally oriented and related; they do not exist in Liverpool the same way that they exist in Isfahan. I have seen that many, many times. It is very important to emphasize that when we talk about the traditional “science of the soul,” which deals with certain eternal truths, but as they are applied

to different circumstances and conditions, and therefore it is not uniform like, say, the physical sciences are to an extent. As I said, even that I do not accept, but at least on a certain level a Boeing can fly from Europe to Beijing and fly on the basis of the same laws of aerodynamics, which exist in both places. In the field of psychology, that is not true.

**SBS:** Modernism and by extension postmodernism are the very negation of Spirit; this negation constitutes the foundations of modern science and its psychology. A central challenge to the authentic meeting between spirituality and psychology is the entrenched negative assessment and pathologizing tendency of psychology toward religion. Can contemporary psychology return to its complete and integral condition as a “science of the soul” within the bedrock of science as it is known today? If so, what needs to occur for this to take place?

**SHN:** Absolutely not. The bedrock of modern science is physics. In physics anything other than the physical world is an epiphenomenon depending on the physical world. It has no independence of its own. Modern science, as long as it remains in the confines of Cartesian bifurcation and the materialism of the seventeenth century, which remains the dominant philosophy of nature, you might say, of the philosophy of science that has dominated Western science for the last four centuries – it is not able to do that at all, no.

You cannot extend modern science to include psychology. It has been attempted by some psychologists who use quantitative methods and so forth and so on, but they do not really get to the reality and nature of the soul. The soul does not mean anything and is not even used scientifically because of the influence of modern science. The word “soul” itself is not a scientific term today. Rather, the term “psyche” is used, yet in a very limited way reduced from its meaning in the traditional context [see endnote 5]. Human beings use it in everyday parlance, but in modern science, the word “soul” does not mean anything, and therefore to the question that you asked, the answer to it is definitely not.

**SBS:** Within all the world’s religions and their mystical dimensions resides a complete and integral psychology or “science of the soul.” The great art historian of the twentieth century Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has referred to it as the perennial psychology (1977), which is innately aligned with the perennial philosophy. How would you define the perennial psychology?

**SHN:** What you call perennial psychology is in a sense an application of perennial philosophy. Perennial psychology is based on the understanding of the total human microcosm and also macrocosm on that we human beings are constituted of the hermetic tri-division of Spirit, soul, and body that was so famous in the West of *Spiritus, anima, corpus* in the Middle Ages in Latin, and in Greek, *Pneuma, psyche, hylé*, and other corresponding divisions. This tripartite division was absolutely essential to the understanding of the nature of man, the *anthrōpos*. Perennial psychology means a psychology that is based on this timeless truth, but the application of perennial psychology is not the same as the application of perennial metaphysics.

In perennial metaphysics we are dealing with universal principles with particularization that is in fact related to a language that is used for the expression of that particular metaphysical truth, whether you are using German, Persian, English, Arabic, or Chinese, or whatever it is. Whereas perennial psychology is really the application of the understanding of the cosmic and microcosmic dimension of the human soul at its different levels, but as it applies to a particular human collectivity. The human soul is conditioned by the revelation, which dominates over that particular civilization in which the human being is raised, even if they come to reject it.

The cause and manner of the rejection of God in France is very different from the rejection of God in Delhi. The rejection of the truths of a particular tradition is also within the cadre of its worldview. It is the traditions that form the world within which the soul acts, reacts, and even rebels against because when you act against, it is against something; it is against a concrete factor or a concrete statement. Perennial psychology is very pertinent as a subject for the understanding of this issue as well.

It must be understood that although there are universal principles that you see in perennial psychology in different domains, its application as schools of traditional psychology or the “science of the soul” that were developed are based on a particular civilization, its culture, but most of all its religion, its traditions, even its climate and the relationship of a particular human collectivity with its natural ambiance. All of these factors were considered, and you have to take them into consideration.

**SBS:** Although the perennial philosophy was the cornerstone for the inclusion of the spiritual dimension within contemporary psychology, especially within humanistic and transpersonal psychology, in recent years, key representatives within these orientations have called for the expulsion of this framework from psychology (see endnote 6). Yet this seems to fail to recognize that without the perennial philosophy there is no ontological and corresponding epistemological foundation that can facilitate both human diversity and religious pluralism. What role do you see the perennial philosophy and its perennial psychology providing in contemporary psychology and mental health treatment?

**SHN:** Perennial philosophy is a whole, a totality, and cannot be used legitimately piecemeal in a profane psychology. Its legitimate use would be to understand its principles and applications and consequently modify current schools of psychology in accordance with the Truths of the perennial philosophy. But then, of course, modern psychology and mental health treatments would no longer be what they are today.

**SBS:** There are many individuals seeking psychotherapy or mental health services who do not have a religious tradition and are not necessarily interested in religion, yet there are others who over the course of treatment realize their need for religion. With this said there are also those who want to deepen their spiritual life, but do not know how and if it can be incorporated into their mental health treatment. Psychotherapists knowledgeable in religion and spirituality or the perennial

psychology would be well equipped in working with individuals who are either secular or religious in their outlook. However, the same is not the case for mental health professionals lacking this knowledge or training, and as a result, it seems like they could potentially do harm unknowingly. Do you have any thoughts on this?

**SHN:** What you say is very pertinent. However, the first part of your statement, two questions above although true in many cases, is not true for everyone, but if it is true it should also hold up for mental health professionals.

**SBS:** Many individuals today do not know whether they need psychological or spiritual help; they appear to be unable to discern between these two domains, which leads to many problems, including the blurring of the function of the psychotherapist or mental health professional and that of the spiritual guide. It is apparent that contemporary psychology is incapable of distinguishing what has been termed “the decisive boundary” (Lings, 1991), that is the separate domains of the spirit and psyche. Can you please explain why this is relevant and how the perennial psychology can aid in rectifying this issue?

**SHN:** In traditional societies, the people who fulfilled the function of a psychologist today were priests, Brahmins, *hakims* in Islam, or people corresponding to them. They did not separate the spiritual needs of the patient from psychological needs; the two were not separated in most cases from each other. The problem that you pose is really a modern problem. If a psychologist has a religious foundation, who at least believes in God, he is able to treat many of the psychological problems that a person has and does so much better than a secular psychologist, even, if that patient be secular because sometimes that person has problems that have to do with the separation of the soul from the Spirit. A psychologist with religious function can do a better job in most cases than a secular psychologist for whom the reality of the person is bound by and exhausted by his or her psychological reality.

**SBS:** While present-day individuals struggle with myriad psychological issues and may require a certain amount of psychological help prior to entering the spiritual path or while on the path itself, it appears that no amount of therapeutic work at the horizontal level of the empirical ego can ever be sufficient, meaning the process of psychotherapy can go on for years, if not throughout one’s entire life, without achieving psychological health. This is because the ego is unable to transcend itself and requires a vertical dimension or the Spirit for integration. With this said, there are those who emphasize, “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody” (Engler, 1983, p. 36). Or “If you don’t befriend Freud, it will be harder to get to Buddha” (Wilber, 1996, p. 155). Although they are not necessarily saying the same thing, they do appear to presuppose that the saints and sages of the religions had forgotten or were unaware that individuals first need to enter into therapy or receive mental health treatment to achieve psychological health prior to embarking on the spiritual path. Can you please address this?

**SHN:** No, the saints and sages were not forgetful or ignorant of the psychological realm; such a statement does not mean anything. Yes, the door to spiritual realization lies through “Know thyself,” the Delphic saying, or in Islam, the saying

of the Prophet, *man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” Self-knowledge is important, but it has nothing to do with having therapy in the modern sense although spiritual realization starts with curing the ailments of the soul understood traditionally. So, there is such a thing as spiritual therapy, in a sense of treatment; “therapy” means “to cure,” to cure an ailment, in Greek. A spiritual teacher, when someone comes to him for initiation to follow the spiritual path, in a sense first treats the soul of that person as a doctor would treat the body – the master is a doctor of the soul who treats the soul of the disciple before allowing him or her to have access to means of practice that belong to the spiritual realm which also involves the cure of the ailments of the soul.

The spiritual life implies having a soul capable of becoming healthy; spiritual life means that you have to have a strong foundation on which you can build an edifice, a spiritual edifice. The traditional Sufi masters in Islam were all master psychologists, but not in the modern sense, but in the sense of knowing the soul of the disciple, knowing the knots in his soul, and when the knots could be revealed causing the person to have problems. To be able to untie the knots, you have to know them; you cannot untie a knot unless you know the knot. All spiritual masters who were authentic in various traditions were master psychologists in a certain sense.

**SBS:** There are those who assert that the religions are trapped in a premodern worldview and emphasize that they need to be liberated from their cultural trappings and updated (see Wilber, 2017, 2018). Deriving from this perspective is the assertion that the world’s religions are somehow without models for human development and need to integrate the insights of developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget (1896–1980), Clare W. Graves (1914–1986), Jane Loevinger (1918–2008), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), Don Beck (b. 1937), and Robert Kegan (b. 1946), among others, for them to be complete and integral. This suggests that the universal and timeless wisdom found throughout the world was unaware of the phases and intricacies of human development. What are your thoughts on this?

**SHN:** I consider such views to be total nonsense. In fact, spiritual teachers were fully aware of the possibilities of human development in the vastest sense of the term. What does “development” mean? We use it all the time: economic development, social development, this and that. Let us take a more specific meaning – the growing of the soul as it actualizes all its possibilities. There is a part that has to do with the intellectual and mental aspects of the human being in the first, second, third, fourth grades. In each grade you learn something and your soul and mind develops. That is easy to understand. Wisdom traditions carried such successive and upward stages of development into the spiritual realm far beyond what modern developmental psychologists can know or imagine.

Spiritual development must begin with the possibilities that exist within the soul of the person who is going to be spiritually developed. You can develop dough and knead it until you make bread, but you cannot do that with a brick. You have to have the appropriate substance in the soul. That is why not all human beings are made for the spiritual life, but God’s Mercy is such that he makes religion accessible to all; so even if they do not have the possibility of developing to the

highest levels of sanctity and metaphysical knowledge, at least they can develop the possibility of their soul to be good servants of God, lovers of God, good human beings and so on.

**SBS:** In recent years, there has been a revival of psychedelics in clinical research providing very promising results in the treatment of mental health and substance use disorders, including trauma and end-of-life care. Even though the medical use of psychedelics has demonstrated efficacy in clinical trials, what are your thoughts and concerns on using psychedelics for medical and therapeutic purposes? While psychedelic substances may be able to relieve suffering or help at one level, could they also cause suffering or harm on another? Meaning, are there any spiritual dangers of which modern medicine, psychiatry, and psychology may be unaware and to which we need to pay close attention?

**SHN:** This is a very complicated and vast field. Huston Smith [1919–2016] was one of the first people to try LSD [lysergic acid diethylamide] at Harvard and has written a very good book [*Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (2000)] about this matter. I concur with what he has to say for the most part. First of all, let me say that there are certain traditions, such as the Native American traditions, where certain substances are used, such as peyote. They are used not to bring about or produce mystical experiences, but in a sense to help the soul experience the spiritual world. Yet this is within the cadre of a particular tradition. Westerners going and taking these substances recreationally is very different and dangerous.

The use of psychedelics for purely medical purposes is not totally unknown to traditional schools of medicine where certain forms of herbal drugs were used for medical purposes to put a person in a state or condition of relieving pain or removing certain ailments. You have it in Hindu medicine or Āyurveda, Islamic medicine, Chinese medicine and so forth. It goes without saying. That is very different, however, from using these psychedelics in order to affect the experience of the soul in its relationship with its final end, to God or to the fear of death. That is not going to relieve the problem. Of course, you can give morphine injections to someone in pain who does not know he is going to die in his sleep. I am not talking about such a situation.

In fact, from a spiritual point of view it is much better to die being awake than asleep. In Islam, the faithful pray that they be aware at the last moment of their lives so as to be able to say, *Lā ilāha illa'LLāh*, “There is no divinity but the Divine.” These days many think that it is so wonderful if one dies in one’s sleep. How do you know that such a person does not suffer? How do you know what will be going on inside his being? These things must be distinguished from each other.

From a traditional or perennialist point of view, we are totally opposed to the use of psychedelics to induce mystical states, which became prevalent in the 1960s counter-culture movement. We are absolutely against this practice, which is a very serious matter. That is not to be confused with the purely medical use of forms of what you would call psychedelics. Even opium, in a sense, is a psychedelic in that it induces certain psychological states, but it has a very important therapeutic effect

upon the body and was used traditionally as a medicine and is still used today. So, these are two levels to keep distinct from each other.

Traditional teachings were able to protect society to a large extent from the misuse of psychedelics outside of medical situations. There were of course exceptions, such as the case of people who were opium addicts in nineteenth-century China or in the Islamic world; there have always been people in every civilization who have taken drugs for their psychological effects as alcoholics do in the modern world, alcohol itself being a drug. I am not saying that it too was totally absent in days of old, but it was not accepted as the norm outside their spiritual use. What has happened in the modern world, to which we are totally opposed, is the use of drugs as a substitute for religion. I once said jokingly “Karl Marx [1818–1883] said, ‘Religion is...the opium of the people’ [Marx, 1982, p. 131]. Now *opium is the religion of the people.*” We are opposed to that practice, and these two functions of psychedelics must not be confused with each other.

As I said previously, if psychedelics are utilized purely on a medical basis, that is acceptable and there are a few people who through this experience on the medical level, on the biological level that modern medicine deals with, come through it with a kind of opening to the spiritual world. This can happen, but we are again opposed to the use of psychedelics as a means of opening the soul to the Spirit.

**SBS:** In this connection, it is worth broaching the question here about the role of psychotropic medications — such as anti-anxiety agents, antidepressants, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, and stimulants — as the statistics illustrating the explosion of individuals taking these medications are alarming and no less a sign of the times. There is mounting research that psychotropic medications do not work as commonly assumed and, in many cases, they not only create more problems such as unwanted side effects, but can also cause chronic and potentially irreversible harm (see endnote 7). The more people diagnosed and treated does not lead to a decrease in mental health problems; on the contrary, the numbers of individuals requiring services is significantly escalating. While psychotropic medications might reduce certain symptoms and could appear to be of benefit to improve functioning and cognition and may be necessary in some cases or for short durations, could they impede spiritual development and psychological integration? What are your thoughts on this?

**SHN:** Yes, they could, by a person over-relying upon them rather than using his free will to reach God, which God wants us to do in order to walk towards Him; the danger is that such persons will over-rely on these substances rather than using their spiritual will. Spiritually speaking, God wants us to walk towards Him with the free will that He has given us. He has given us faith and intelligence, He has given us revelation to guide us as a means to walk toward Him, and nothing can take the place of this reality.

God did not say, “in my creation I have put certain substances that you can substitute for the spiritual life”; that is not true. It would be against God’s Justice, and it would be against God’s Mercy, both.

**SBS:** How do you view the mass dissemination and consumption of psychotropic medications in the modern and postmodern world, not to mention the proliferation of human beings diagnosed with a mental illness of some kind in the present day?

**SHN:** It is certainly very, very negative, yes; it is a sign of the times, a part of the reign of quantity [see endnote 8] and a kind of illusion based on an absolutization of terrestrial life, of seeing human life as only terrestrial life, which is then absolutized. People are not left to die well spiritually speaking. All of these artificial ways of keeping people alive with tubes and so forth relate to this truth, to the idea that there is nothing after this terrestrial life. In contrast, in traditional societies the important thing is not when you die, but how you die, in what state. That is what is important.

**SBS:** The contemporary mindset seems to want to ignore the transitory or impermanent nature of human existence and the human being's reliance on the Divine by attempting to remove the reality of suffering from terrestrial life. How should we understand the metaphysical or spiritual dimension of suffering?

**SHN:** Now, first of all, do not forget that the word "suffering" is related in its meaning to "sacrifice," and "sacrifice" comes from the Latin word *sacrificium*, "to make sacred." To sacrifice in a sense is to sacralize. Suffering is part of human existence, but it is not absolute. For example, Christianity emphasizes the way of suffering, but Islam does not. Nevertheless, a Muslim suffers through life as a Christian does. The significance of suffering spiritually is not, however, the same in all perspectives, in all religions.

To be sure, suffering is a universal phenomenon, but it is not for human beings to try to suffer on purpose in spiritual paths of a sapiential nature. There are certain practices, such as yogis lying on a bed of nails or a Christian monk doing all kinds of extreme forms of asceticism in order to come closer to the Divine. Christ himself suffered on the cross; yet this type of sacred event is not universal. Even in Christianity, where suffering has such a positive spiritual aspect, to relieve the suffering of others is also part of the message of Christ. When Christ said, "feed the poor" [Matthew 25:35], the poor, by not having food, are suffering. That means, therefore, to overcome their suffering. Such a message could not be absent from the message of Christ, and it is certainly not. The New Testament has many statements about it.

In Islam, as in Judaism, religion is not focused on suffering; it is there for the realization of the oneness of God. Some people suffer more, some people less. If you live according to the Divine Norm, you might suffer much less than those who do not, or we might suffer more. A great saint might lose his son to an accident and an atheist may never lose his son. These are very complicated matters, the question of suffering and why we suffer, but metaphysically it is very easy to answer: suffering is the result of separation from God. That is it. If we can overcome that separation, we can overcome our suffering; we are done with our suffering. Suffering is not an end in itself; it is a part of the reality of human life. Some people suffer more, some people suffer less, but God wants us to derive the right lesson

from it in either case: to increase our reliance upon Him, to surrender ourselves more to Him.

We Muslims, when somebody asks us how are you, we say, *al-ḥamdu li'LLāh*, “Praise be to God.” Even if we are sick and somebody asks us how we are we always start with *al-ḥamdu li'LLāh*, with resignation to our destiny, to what God has willed of us. In that way, suffering can become a very positive element. There is a very famous story about Śrī Ramana Maharshi [1879–1950], the great sage of India who was an Advaita master of the highest level, and he died of cancer, a very painful form of cancer. When asked if he was suffering, he said, “My body is suffering, but I am not suffering” [see Maharshi, 1996].

In Persian when we say, “How are you?” we use the word *ḥāl*, which also means spiritual state. People say, “*Hāl-e shomā?* – How are you?” I knew a great Sufi master who would respond, “My *ḥāl* is wonderful, it is only my body that is hurting.” He would dissociate the pain from his *ḥāl*. Suffering should be taken as part of our destiny, what God has willed for us, and so, we should be able to accept it with patience and surrender and not to rebel. One of the characteristics of the typical modern man is rebellion against his destiny with the illusion that he can live without suffering and also, without God. He says to himself if only he were to put religion and God aside, he would not suffer inwardly. This is one of the main arguments of so many atheists such as Richard Dawkins [b. 1941] and others. It is a very important issue.

Suffering is not an end in itself in most spiritual paths. For example, the path of Shankarāchārya [eighth-century] of Advaita Vedānta is not based on suffering; it comes from the knowledge of the Absolute, the discernment between *Ātmā* and *māyā*. In the human world, it is very difficult not to suffer at all and suffering is part and parcel of being born into the human state of fallen man. The real man or woman, the spiritual person, is he or she who grows through suffering and suffering does not separate that person from God, from the spiritual world.

**SBS:** You began speaking and writing about the environmental crisis in the 1960s, long before it was popular to do so, and have skillfully articulated its root cause in your book *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (1968). Can you please speak about the perennial psychology and its ecological focus and how it can help reintegrate the human being with the environment?

**SHN:** Yes, I shall do so. Even traditional psychology alone cannot save the environment. We need a traditional cosmology, a real understanding of the human state and how it is related to the natural world and how the two are related to God. The problem is not only psychological. Traditional or perennial psychology has a very important role because it enables us to realize that the harmony between the human being and the natural environment is a very important component of psychological health. There are many people in the modern world who are atheists, who do not believe in religion or are agnostics at best, but love nature and nature plays a spiritual therapeutic role for them.

I remember that once I was in Sweden on a Sunday. Sweden has had remarkable success in the preservation of its natural environment, even within Stockholm; the forests are so well preserved and untouched. I went with a Swedish friend in the forest with beautiful trees for a walk in the morning and he hugged a tree. I asked him, "What are you doing?" He said, "This is Sunday and for us this is our religion. I hug a tree, and this is my religion." That act alludes to a profound point. It means that these people, without realizing it, are searching for a nonhuman reality with which to associate and they do not connect that nonhuman reality with the reality that is the source of human reality that is God Himself, but within nature. In the spiritual traditions, nature plays a very important role as a support for the spiritual life. In my books *The Encounter of Man and Nature* [1968] and *Religion and the Order of Nature* [1996] and in many essays that I have written over the decades I have discussed this issue.

**SBS:** There has been a mass popularization of mindfulness and other meditative practices, including yoga, into the dominant culture in the modern West, especially within contemporary psychology, yet there is little or no acknowledgment of the religious and spiritual heritage from which these practices were extracted or appropriated. While these practices can be useful, they appear to be only useful to a certain point due to being removed from their traditional spiritual context. It is as if contemporary psychology wants the fruits of the diverse contemplative practices of the world known to the perennial psychology, but it is not ready to acknowledge its reliance on the spiritual domain for efficacy. Would you please elaborate on this matter?

**SHN:** I am of course completely opposed to this view. Now, there is a part of *hatha yoga*, which involves stretching and exercising of the physical body, which is permissible on the corporeal level although in integral yoga it is a way of opening the body through *āsanas* [postures] to higher levels of reality, but to practice the higher forms of yoga, especially *tantric yoga*, I do not consider these practices to be positive at all, but to be extremely negative. To meditate simply by having meditation sessions can be very dangerous if it is not related to an integral tradition.

In spiritual practice I always tell my students you have both meditation and the practice of invocation, such as *japa* in Hinduism. The first, which is the meditation, is as if you have a toothache and go to the dentist and the first thing that he does is to empty out the part of your tooth which has been destroyed and then the second part is to fill it with the appropriate substance. The first part corresponds to meditation, which many people do these days, and it is going to make it much worse for the toothache if you do not have the second phase.

Historically when great traditions have met with each other, there has been occasional crisscrossing of certain techniques of spiritual practices across the traditions. I always give the example to my students of the Naqshbandi Order, a Central Asian Sufi order founded by Bahā al-Dīn Naqshband Bukhārī [1318–1389] from near Bukhara that spread into India. When it reached India, certain Naqshbandi Sufis adopted a technique that is still used in some parts of India in which you breathe through one nostril and out of the other. Now, we do not have this practice in other schools of Sufism. It was taken from yoga. It is an element

integrated into another living spiritual tradition, which is very different from taking elements of sacred traditions without believing in the sacred. In the traditional world, such borrowings are integrated into a total worldview and become part of that worldview. These are two very different realities. A lot of this yoga and meditation is like New Age religion, which is really an aspirin substitute for the serious medicine that the soul really needs.

**SBS:** What advice would you give students pursuing the field of psychology or established mental health professionals in the field, who are interested in incorporating the spiritual dimension not only in their own lives, but also in the work that they do with human beings facing immense struggles and suffering in our times?

**SHN:** This is a very important question. First of all, to apply any form of knowledge to others, you first of all have to have it within yourself; that is, if a person wants to be a traditional psychologist in the present-day context and wants to integrate perennial psychology into his or her practice, first of all he or she has to incorporate it into his or her own worldview. Ultimately, it is his or her psyche that is acting upon the psyche of the patient. If there is no transformation of the acting psyche, there can be no positive effect on the deeper level upon the psyche that is being acted upon.

You have to begin with yourself, to be able to not only read books on traditional or perennial psychology, but also to understand it and to incorporate it to become part of your worldview so that the psychological treatment of the patient is informed by the fact that the psyche is not an independent substance; it is a substance within a substance, a soul within and in relation to the Spirit. It is not only like a substance, such as the table on which I am leaning. The psychological world is related on one hand to the world of Spirit and on the other hand to the world of the body. You have to understand this cosmology, which negates completely modern cosmology that denies the reality of anything except energy and material domains. You have to be able to make the traditional understanding of the psyche or the soul your own in order to be able to apply it correctly.

I know a few psychologists who have been able to do that, but very few. I hope that in the future more will do so. I even hope that the interview we have had together will at least make some people aware of what real sacred psychology is. You cannot have sacred psychology without the sacred. You cannot engage with the sacred without understanding the sacred, and you cannot understand the sacred without experiencing the sacred.

You have to have a way to experience the sacred and then understand sacred psychology and have the creativity to apply that knowledge to present-day conditions. This is what Sufi masters do even now, those who are qualified Sufi masters. They are not psychologists in the clinical sense, but they are able to apply the traditional teachings of perennial psychology to the condition of disciples who are not medieval people from Damascus – they are men and women who live in the world in which you and I live, who face all of the psychological chaos, fears, anxieties, trepidations – all the problems that go on in the world today.

**SBS:** Thank you so much for taking the time out of your very full schedule to discuss and elucidate on what is a true and integral psychology or the “science of the soul” and its relationship to the perennial philosophy.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Smith, H., 1978, 1983, 1992, 2006; Smith, H., & Smith, K., 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> “Tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and the esoteric as well as to the spiritual life, science and the arts” (Nasr, 1989, p. 68).
- <sup>3</sup> Transpersonal psychology is perhaps the first movement within the discipline to reclaim the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world and situate them within its methodological framework. While transpersonal psychology recognizes the importance of religion and spirituality, its adherence to behaviorism and psychoanalysis hampers its depth. There are points of contact between traditional forms of psychology and spiritually integrated psychotherapy, but traditional psychology does not rely on modern science to validate its truths. It is this author’s opinion that transpersonal psychology attempts to synthesize humanity’s sapiential traditions, yet it does so through the prism of modern science and not from the vantage point of the more comprehensive perennial philosophy, which encompasses the diverse cultures, knowledge systems, religions, and their inner dimensions (see Bendeck Sotillos, 2013b, 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> This is in large part due to the desacralization and reduction of psychology or the “science of the soul” and the historical trajectory that has led to this predicament. The spiritual dimension, if it is introduced, is often done so in an *ad hoc* manner based on the subjective or clinical opinion of the mental health practitioner. This is due to the strong bias that the discipline continues to have toward religion and the spiritual traditions because of its divorce from the sacred (Bendeck Sotillos, 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> “Take the human state. It is composed of body, soul, and spirit. There is no way one can integrate the body without the presence of the soul. . . . There is absolutely no way to integrate the soul and the mind without the presence of the spirit and intellect, which are ultimately the same reality. It is only the spirit that is able to integrate the psyche, and the intellect the mind. To speak seriously about integration, we must accept the vertical dimension of reality. The reason that we have such difficulty to integrate anything in the present-day world is the eclipse of knowledge of that vertical dimension” (Nasr, 2007, pp. 73–74).
- <sup>6</sup> See Ferrer, 2000, 2002; Hartelius, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Taylor, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Wilber, 1983, 1992, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> See Frances, 2013; Whitaker, 2010; Whitaker & Cosgrove, 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> See Guénon, 2001.

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