

A biography of seyyed hossein nasr



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Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the world's leading experts on Islamic science and spirituality, is University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. Professor Nasr is the author of numerous books including *Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Kazi Publications, 1998), *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford, 1996) and *Knowledge and the Sacred* (SUNY, 1989).

Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, currently University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, Washington D. C. is one of the most important and foremost scholars of Islamic, Religious and Comparative Studies in the world today. Author of over fifty books and five hundred articles which have been translated into several major Islamic, European and Asian languages, Professor Nasr is a well known and highly respected intellectual figure both in the West and the Islamic world. An eloquent speaker with a charismatic presence, Nasr is a much sought after speaker at academic conferences and seminars, university and public lectures and also radio and television programs in his area of expertise. Possessor of an impressive academic and intellectual record, his career as a teacher and scholar spans over four decades.

Born in 1933, Professor Nasr began his illustrious teaching career in 1955 when he was still a young and promising, doctoral student at Harvard University. Over the years, he has taught and trained an innumerable number of students who have come from the different parts of the world,

and many of whom have become important and prominent scholars in their fields of study.

He has trained different generations of students over the years since 1958 when he was a professor at Tehran University and then, in America since the Iranian revolution in 1979, specifically at Temple University in Philadelphia from 1979 to 1984 and at the George Washington University since 1984 to the present day. The range of subjects and areas of study which Professor Nasr has involved and engaged himself with in his academic career and intellectual life are immense. As demonstrated by his numerous writings, lectures and speeches, Professor Nasr speaks and writes with great authority on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from philosophy to religion to spirituality, to music and art and architecture, to science and literature, to civilizational dialogues and the natural environment.

For Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the quest for knowledge, specifically knowledge which enables man to understand the true nature of things and which furthermore, “ liberates and delivers him from the fetters and limitations of earthly existence,” has been and continues to be the central concern and determinant of his intellectual life.

Brief Biography

Seyyed Hossein Nasr was born on April 7, 1933 (19 Farvadin 1312 A. H. solar) in Tehran into a family of distinguished scholars and physicians. His father, Seyyed Valiallah, a man of great learning and piety, was a physician to the Iranian royal family, as was his father before him. The name “ Nasr” which means “ victory” comes from the title “ na~r al-aibb (Victory of
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Physicians) which was conferred on Professor Nasrs grandfather by the King of Persia. Nasr also comes from a family of Sufis. One of his ancestors was Mulla Seyyed Muhammad Taqi Poshtmashhad, who was a famous saint of Kashan, and his mausoleum which is located next to the tomb of the Safavid king Shah Abbas, is still visited by pilgrims to this day.

As a young boy, Nasr attended one of the schools near his home. His early formal education included the usual Persian curriculum at school with an extra concentration in Islamic and Persian subjects at home, as well as tutorial in French. However for Nasr, it was the long hours of discussion with his father, mostly on philosophical and theological issues, complemented by both reading and reaction to the discourses carried on by those who came to his fathers house, that constituted an essential aspect of his early education and which in many ways set the pattern and tone of his intellectual development. This was the situation for the first twelve years of Nasrs life.

Nasrs arrival in America at the young age of twelve marked the beginning of a new period in his life which was totally different and therefore, discontinuous from his early life in Iran. He attended The Peddie School in Highstown, New Jersey and in 1950 graduated as the valedictorian of his class and also winner of the Wycliffe Award which was the schools highest honor given to the most outstanding all-round student. It was during the four years at Peddie that Nasr acquired his knowledge of the English language, as well as studying the sciences, American history, Western culture and Christianity.

Nasr chose to go to M. I. T. for college. He was offered a scholarship and was the first Iranian student to be admitted as an undergraduate at M. I. T. He began his studies at M. I. T in the Physics Department with some of the most gifted students in the country and outstanding professors of physics. His decision to study physics was motivated by the desire to gain knowledge of the nature of things, at least at the level of physical reality. However, at the end of his freshman year, although he was the top student in his class, he began to feel oppressed by the overbearingly scientific atmosphere with its implicit positivism. Furthermore, he discovered that many of the metaphysical questions which he had been concerned with were not being asked, much less answered. Thus, he began to have serious doubts as to whether physics would lead him to an understanding of the nature of physical reality. His doubt was confirmed when the leading British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in a small group discussion with the students following a lecture he had given at M. I. T, stated that physics does not concern itself with the nature of physical reality per se but with mathematical structures related to pointer readings.

The shock of discovering the real nature of the subject he had chosen to study, together with the overbearingly scientific atmosphere at his Department, led Nasr to experience a major intellectual and spiritual crisis during his second year. Although the crisis did not destroy his belief in God, it shook certain fundamental elements in his worldview, such as his understanding of the meaning of life, the significance of knowledge and the means to find the Truth. He was prepared to leave the field of physics and M. I. T. and depart from America in quest of the Truth. However, the strong

discipline in him, inculcated by his father, prevented him from abandoning his studies altogether. He remained at M. I. T. and graduated with honors, but his heart was no longer with physics.

Having realized in his second year that a study of the physical sciences would neither lead him to an understanding of the nature of physical reality nor deal with some of the metaphysical questions he was concerned with, Nasr decided to look at other fields of study for his answers. He started to read extensively and to take many courses in the humanities, especially those taught by Professor Giorgio Di Santillana, the famous Italian philosopher and historian of science. Under Professor Di Santillanas instruction, Nasr began his serious study of not only the ancient Greek wisdom as contained in the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus but also European, Medieval philosophy, Dantes highly mystical and symbolic Divine Comedy, Hinduism and a critique of modern Western thought. It was also Di Santillana who first introduced him to the writings of one of the most important traditionalist writers of this century, Rene Guenon. Guenons writings played a decisive role in laying the intellectual foundation of Nasrs traditionalist perspective. Nasr also had the great fortune of having access to the library of the late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the outstanding Singhalese metaphysician and historian of art. The library had an incredible collection of works on traditional philosophy and art from all over the world. It was in this library that Nasr first discovered the works of the other tradationalist writers such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis and Martin Lings and who were to have tremendous and enduring intellectual and spiritual influence on Nasr.

According to Nasr, it was the discovery of traditional metaphysics and the philosophia perennis through the works of these figures which settled the crisis he had experienced and gained an intellectual certitude which has never left him since. From then on, he was certain that there was such a thing as the Truth and that it could be attained through knowledge by means of the intellect which is guided and illuminated by divine revelation. His childhood love for the attainment of knowledge returned to him but on a higher and deeper plane. The traditional writings of Schuon with their singular emphasis on the need for the practice of a spiritual discipline as well as theoretical knowledge, were especially instrumental in determining the course of Nasr's intellectual and spiritual life from that time onward.

Upon his graduation from M. I. T., Nasr enrolled himself in a graduate program in geology and geophysics at Harvard University. After obtaining his Masters degree in geology and geophysics in 1956, he went on to pursue his Ph. D. degree in the history of science and learning at Harvard. Nasr wanted to study other types of sciences of nature apart from the modern Western and also to understand why modern science had developed as it had. He planned to write his dissertation under the supervision of George Sarton, a great authority on Islamic science. However, Sarton passed away before he could begin his dissertation work and since there was not another specialist in Islamic science at Harvard then, he wrote his dissertation under the direction of three professors. They were I. Bernard Cohen, Hamilton Gibb and Harry Wolfson.

It was also at Harvard that Nasr resumed his study of classical Arabic which he had left since coming to America. He struggled with philosophical Arabic
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while getting some assistance from Wolfson and Gibb. However, the mastery of philosophical Arabic was only attained after he studied Islamic philosophy from the traditional masters of Iran after his return to his homeland in 1958.

During his Harvard years, Nasr also travelled to Europe, especially to France, Switzerland, Britain, Italy and Spain, widening his intellectual horizon and establishing important and fruitful contacts. It was during these travels to Europe that Nasr met with the foremost traditionalist writers and exponents of the *philosophia perennis*, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, who made a tremendous impact and decisive contribution to his intellectual and spiritual life. He also travelled to Morocco in North Africa, which had great spiritual significance for Nasr who embraced Sufism in the form taught and practised by the great Sufi saint of the Maghrib, Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi. Thus, the years at Harvard witnessed the crystallization of the major intellectual and spiritual elements of Nasr's mature worldview, elements which have since dominated and determined the course and pattern of his scholarship and academic career.

At twenty-five, Nasr graduated with a Ph. D. degree from Harvard and on the way to completing his first book, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. His doctoral dissertation entitled “Conceptions of Nature in Islamic Thought” was published in 1964 by Harvard University Press as *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*. Although he was offered a position as assistant professor at M. I. T., Nasr decided to return permanently to Iran.

Back in Iran, Nasr was offered a position as an Associate Professor of philosophy and the history of science at the Faculty of Letters in Tehran

University. A few months after his return, Nasr married a young woman from a respected family whose members were close friends of his family. Five years later at the age of thirty, Nasr became the youngest person to become a full professor at the University. He used his position and influence to bring major changes to strengthen and expand the philosophy program at Tehran University which like many of its other programs, was very much dominated by and limited to French intellectual influence. Nasr initiated the important move of teaching Islamic philosophy on the basis of its own history and from its own perspective and to encourage his Iranian students to study other philosophies and intellectual traditions from the point of view of their own tradition. He maintains that one cannot hope to understand and appreciate ones own intellectual tradition from the viewpoint of another, just as one cannot see oneself through the eyes of another person. He also created greater awareness and interest in the study of Oriental philosophies among the students and faculty members. Since Tehran University was the only university in Iran to offer a doctorate in philosophy, these changes introduced by Nasr had far reaching influence. Many universities in Iran integrated these changes into their philosophical studies and until today Nasrs perspective that Iranian students should study other philosophical traditions from the view of their own tradition instead of studying their tradition from the perspective of Western thought and philosophy remains widely influential. The students he has trained and who have become scholars and university professors of philosophy have enabled this perspective to have enduring influence in Iran.

Apart from the philosophy program, Nasr was also involved in the university's doctoral program in Persian language and literature for those whose mother tongue was not Persian. He strengthened the philosophical component of this program and had many outstanding students from outside of Iran to receive training, not only in Persian language, but also the rich treasury of philosophical and Sufi literature written in Persian. Many of the students trained in this program have since become important scholars in this field such as the American scholar, William Chittick and the Japanese woman scholar, Sachiko Murata.

Furthermore, from 1968 to 1972, Nasr was made Dean of the Faculty and for a while, Academic Vice-Chancellor of Tehran University. Through these positions, he introduced many important changes which all aimed at strengthening the university programs in the humanities generally and in philosophy, specifically. In 1972, he was appointed President of Aryamehr University by the Shah of Iran. Aryamehr University was then the leading scientific and technical university in Iran and the Shah, as the patron, wanted Professor Nasr to develop the university on the model of M. I. T. but with firm roots in Iranian culture. Consequently, a strong humanities program in Islamic thought and culture, with a particular emphasis upon an Islamic philosophy of science, was established at Aryamehr University by Nasr. Nasr's pioneering effort has led Aryamehr to create one of the first graduate programs in the Islamic world in the philosophy of science based upon the Islamic philosophy of science, some ten years ago. In 1973, the Queen of Iran appointed Professor Nasr to establish a center for the study and propagation of philosophy under her patronage. Hence, the Imperial Iranian

Academy of Philosophy was established and very soon became one of the most important and vital centers of philosophical activities in the Islamic world, housing the best library of philosophy in Iran and attracting some of the most distinguished scholars in the field, both from the East and the West, such as Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu. The Academy also organized important seminars and lecture series given by philosophers, offered fellowships for short and long term research work in Islamic philosophy, and comparative philosophy and undertook a major publication program of works in this field in Persian, Arabic, English and French.

Another very important dimension to Nasrs intellectual activities after his return to Iran in 1958, was his program in re-educating himself in Islamic philosophy by learning it at the feet of the masters through the traditional method of oral transmission. He studied hikmah for twenty years under some of the greatest teachers in Iran at the time, reading traditional texts of Islamic philosophy and gnosis, three days a week at the Sepahsalar madrasah in Tehran and also in private homes in Tehran, Qom and Qazwin. Among his venerable teachers were Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Assar, an alim who was an authority on Islamic law, as well as philosophy, and a very close friend of Professor Nasrs father; the great luminary and master of gnosis, Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai and Sayyid Abul-Hasan Qazwini, a great authority on Islamic law and the intellectual sciences who knew mathematics, astronomy and philosophy extremely well. Nasr read and studied several of the major texts of Islamic philosophy under these masters such as the al-Asfar al-arbaah of Mulla Sadra and the Sharh-i manumah of Sabziwari and benefitted greatly from the invaluable insights and

commentaries provided by them orally. In this way, Nasr had the best educational training both from the modern West and the traditional East, a rare combination which put him in a very special position to speak and write with authority on the numerous issues involved in the encounter between East and West, and tradition and modernity, as demonstrated very clearly by his writings and lectures.

During the years Professor Nasr was in Iran, he wrote extensively in Persian and English and occasionally in French and Arabic. His doctoral dissertation was rewritten by him in Persian and it won the royal book award. Nasr also brought out the critical editions of several important philosophical texts such as the complete Persian works of Suhrawardi and of Mulla Sadra and the Arabic texts of Ibn Sina and al-Biruni. Nasr's great interest in the philosophy of one of the greatest later Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra resulted in the publication of the Mulla Sadra written by the traditional masters of Islamic philosophy. Nasr was also the first person to introduce the figure of Mulla Sadra to the English speaking world.

With the assistance of William Chittick, Nasr prepared An Annotated Bibliography of Islamic Science in three volumes, with Persian and English annotations. He also wrote Three Muslim Sages and completed and published Science and Civilization in Islam which he had written while still a student at Harvard. Both of these books were translated into several languages very quickly and were reprinted in Iran many times and have been used for the past three decades as textbooks for courses in Islamic philosophy and science in Iranian universities. Three Muslim Sages, which presents the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition from within, grew out <https://assignbuster.com/a-biography-of-seyyed-hosseini-nasr-biography-samples/>

of three lectures which Nasr gave in 1962 as the first visiting professor at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, which is one of Nasr's most widely read book on the Islamic religion and which opens up the world of Islam, revealing some of its most universal and profound dimensions, was based on the text of the first six of fifteen lectures which he delivered at the American University in Beirut as the first Aga Khan Professor of Islamic studies in 1964-65.

In 1966 Nasr was invited to deliver the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago and to speak on some aspects of the relation between religion, philosophy and the environmental crisis. Consequently, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, which deals with the philosophical and spiritual roots of the question and the first work to predict the coming of the environmental crisis was written for the occasion. Nasr also brought out *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, *Sufi Essays* and *The Transcendent Theosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirazi*. Both *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* and *Sufi Essays* have proved to be very popular and have been translated into many European and Islamic languages and reprinted several times since their first appearance.

In 1964-65, Nasr spent an academic year at the American University of Beirut as the first Aga Khan professor of Islamic Studies. Besides *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Nasr also brought out *Islamic Studies*, which is a collection of articles discussing several fundamental aspects of the Islamic tradition.

This work was later expanded and published under the title, *Islamic Life and Thought*. During this period in Lebanon, Nasr also met with and had

intellectual discourses with several important Catholic and Shi`ite thinkers
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and scholars. He also had the opportunity to meet with the woman Sufi saint Sayyidah Fatimah Yashrutiyah, daughter of the founder of the Yashrutiyah order, a branch of the Shadiliyah Sufi order.

Although Nasr lived in Iran, he maintained strong contacts with America and many of the major universities in the country. He taught at Harvard in 1962 and 65 and conducted short seminars at Princeton University and the University of Utah. He also had close associations with several important American scholars such as Huston Smith, professor of philosophy and comparative religion, Jacob Needleman, editor of the well-known work, *Sword of Gnosis* which includes Nasr's essays, and a number of Catholic and Protestant philosophers and theologians. Nasr also helped with the planning and expansion of Islamic and Iranian studies in several universities such as Princeton, the University of Utah and the University of Southern California. In 1977, he delivered the Kevorkian Lectures on Islamic art at New York University on the meaning and philosophy of Islamic art.

In 1979 at the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Nasr moved with his family to the United States where he would rebuild his life again and secure a university position to support himself and his family. By 1980, Nasr began to write again. He started to work intensively on the research and text of the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh to which he received an invitation shortly before the Iranian Revolution took place. Nasr had the honor of being the first non-Westerner to be invited to deliver the most famous lecture series in the fields of natural theology and philosophy of religion in the West. Thus, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, one of Nasr's most important philosophical works, one which had a great impact on scholars and <https://assignbuster.com/a-biography-of-seyyed-hossein-nasr-biography-samples/>

students of religious studies, came to be prepared amidst the strain of trying times and the strenuous commute between Boston and Philadelphia.

However, Nasr discloses that the actual writing of the text of Knowledge and the Sacred came as a gift from heaven. He was able to write the texts of the lectures with great facility and speed and within a period of less than three months, they were completed. Nasr says that it was as though, he was writing from a text he had previously memorized.

In 1982, Nasr was invited to collaborate on a major project to bring out the Encyclopedia of World Spirituality together with Ewert Cousins, chief editor and professor of Medieval philosophy at Fordham University, and many other leading philosophers and scholars of religion. Nasr accepted to edit the two volumes on Islamic Spirituality, which came out in 1989 and 1991. Both volumes have since become invaluable reference material in English for those interested in this subject. In 1983, Nasr delivered the Wiegand Lecture on the philosophy of religion at the University of Toronto in Canada. He also helped in the establishment of the section on Hermeticism and perennial philosophy at the American Academy of Religion.

Nasr was soon recognised in American academic circles as a traditionalist and a major expositor and advocate of the perennialist perspective. Much of his intellectual activities and writing since being in exile in America, are related to this function and also in the fields of comparative religion, philosophy and religious dialogue. He has participated in many debates and discussions with eminent Christian and Jewish theologians and philosophers such as Hans Kung, John Hick and Rabbi Izmar Schorch. In 1986, Nasr edited The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon and in 1990, he was selected as a <https://assignbuster.com/a-biography-of-seyyed-hossein-nasr-biography-samples/>

patron of the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations of the Sally Oaks College in Birmingham. In addition, he has played an active role in the creation and activities of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington D. C. He has also attended many conferences on this subject including the famous 1993 Parliament of World Religions.

He continues to travel to Europe often, giving lectures and being involved with intellectual activities. He gives lectures at Oxford, University of London and a few other British universities and is a member of the Temenos Academy. In 1994, he was invited to deliver the Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham and a major work entitled Religion and the Order of Nature was produced by Nasr for this occasion.

Nasr also continues to travel to Spain, especially southern Spain which still has an Islamic presence and which reminds him very much of his home country, Iran. It was also during some of his journeys to Spain, that Nasr was inspired to compose several poems related to Spanish themes. Nasr has brought out recently a collection of forty English poems on spiritual themes, which were written within the past fifteen years, under the title Poems of the Way.

Although Professor Nasr continues to have a very busy teaching and lecturing schedule, he still manages to allocate much of his time and energy to writing. 1987 saw the publication of two of his books: Islamic Art and Spirituality and Traditional Islam in the Modern World. Islamic Art and Spirituality which deals with the metaphysical and symbolic significance of

Islamic art, poetry and music is Nasr's first book on this subject. *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* discusses several important dimensions of the Islamic tradition and its relation to the West. Nasr also wrote a book specifically for young Muslims entitled, *A Young Muslims Guide to the Modern World* which addresses some of the major problems and challenges which the modern world presents to them.

Recently, Nasr together with the British scholar of Islamic and Jewish philosophy, Oliver Leaman, edited a two volume work, *History of Islamic Philosophy* which consists of articles written by important scholars in this field, discussing the different aspects and schools of Islamic philosophy and its development in the different parts of the Islamic world. Nasr's continued interest in science is made evident by his latest book on this subject, *The Need for a Sacred Science*. Also, together with one of his former students, Mehdi Amin Razavi, Nasr is now bringing out a major four volume work, *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia* which will be published by Oxford University Press. Razavi also edited earlier, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, which is a collection of Nasr's articles on Islamic philosophy in Persia written during the last forty years.

Another important aspect to Nasr's intellectual activities in Washington D. C. is his active involvement in the activities of the Foundation for Traditional Studies. The Foundation which is devoted to the dissemination of traditional thought was established in 1984 under the direction of a board presided by Nasr. The Foundation has published several books including the festschrift of Frithjof Schuon entitled, *Religion of the Heart*, edited by Nasr and William Stoddart and *In Quest of the Sacred: The Modern World in the Light of* <https://assignbuster.com/a-biography-of-seyyed-hossein-nasr-biography-samples/>

Tradition which Nasr co-edited with the executive director of the Foundation, Katherine OBrien. *In Quest of the Sacred* is a collection of essays presented by some of the major traditionalist writers in an important conference held in Peru, organized by the Foundation and the Peruvian Instituto de Estudios Tradicionales. The Foundation also publishes the journal, “Sophia,” which carries essays on traditional thought written by the leading authorities in this field. Together with the Foundation, Nasr is also involved in the production of a major documentary television series on “Islam and the West,” which deals with some of the more important and profound aspects of the encounter between the Islamic and Western civilizations.

At sixty-six, Seyyed Hossein Nasr leads an extremely active intellectual life with a very busy schedule of teaching at the university and lecturing at many institutions in America and around the world, writing scholarly works, being involved in several intellectual projects simultaneously and meeting individuals who are interested in traditional thought. At the same time, he leads a very intense spiritual life spent in prayer, meditation and contemplation and also providing spiritual counsel for those who seek his advice and guidance. Exiled from his homeland, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has found his home in the inviolable and sacred Center which is neither in the East nor the West.