

Iran - G.S. Brown (Confidential) 1974



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

*J. Sivin*

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT ROOM 3-208
MAR 12 1974
REF. TO _____

TECHNOLOGY STUDIES  
Room 20D-212  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

8 March 1974

Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner  
Room 3-208

Dear Jerry:

My knowledge of the convolutions of Iranian politics is very limited, and I don't think that I would be nearly as good a source for further exploration as some of the more conscientious Iranian graduate students here. My major concern is that the possibility of our making some contribution be explored with open eyes and an open mind. I found your letter very encouraging, since it suggests that is how the problem is being approached. I just thought that I should call to your attention that Gordon does not share many of your doubts. When I mentioned potential instability to him, his only response was to wholeheartedly approve the Shah's using "strong-arm" methods against "insurrectionists."

Yours sincerely,

*Nathan*

N. Sivin



7- ?

March 5, 1974

Professor Nathan Sivin  
Room 20D-212  
M. I. T.

Dear Nathan:

Thanks for sending me the Nasr lecture. I fell off the rim close to the beginning. I would like to talk to you about the Iran matter though, for Nasr, Brown, the Shah, and many mutual friends are interested in having M. I. T. help their school.

I have the same concerns about the political situation and its stability that you express plus my concerns about the nature of his rule. I long ago learned to keep to myself my revulsion regarding the repressive nature of Soviet society, in exchange for the opportunity to learn about it, to help end the cold war and to provide some access to the outside world for Soviet intellectuals. In spite of the present very discouraging situation in the Soviet Union, I think that the effort was worthwhile and I wonder if we don't have an equivalent opportunity to play a constructive or supportive role in Iran.

I would appreciate an opportunity to hear your views on this.

Sincerely yours,

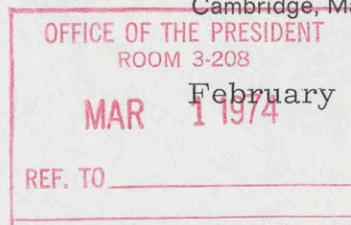
Jerome B. Wiesner  
President

JBW/jh



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

TECHNOLOGY STUDIES  
Room 20D-212  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139



Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner  
Room 3-208

Dear Jerry:

The enclosed letter was written in response to a rather perturbed telephone call from Gordon Brown a week or so ago. Gordon was concerned about the transcript of a talk which Hossein Nasr gave to the Technology and Culture Seminar. He took strong exception to the inclusion of a document which had been attached to the end of Johnny Crocker's transcript. It had been appended at the request of a group of participants in the informal discussion who wished to itemize the questions that they felt had not been answered. Hossein could have kept the discussion non-political, but he did not. My judgment is that Johnny Crocker handled what could have been a ten times more stressful evening with remarkable tact. One of the things that kept it from being more stressful was his promise to attach that document to the summary of the evening's proceedings. I sensed that Gordon may make an issue of this transcript, and thought it might be helpful for you to have the impressions of a neutral observer. Those impressions are what I tried to convey in the enclosed letter.

Over the past year or so, I have had a number of talks with Gordon and have learned a great deal from him about what ought to be going on in the Technology Studies program. We have also had a couple of conversations on another topic, namely the institutional relations Hossein Nasr has been mediating (Hossein and I were undergraduates here at the same time). I have a very high regard for Gordon's judgment with regard to American society and the role of science and engineering in it. I have felt the need to convince him of the complexity of what might be called the social relations of science and engineering in societies that are still largely traditional. In particular, it seems to me extremely important to gather the widest possible cross-section of Iranian points of view before committing the good name of MIT in what I would assess as extremely unstable circumstances. I have been hoping that Gordon and others involved will take the trouble to probe and objectively weigh the viewpoints and interests even of people whom they do not have the habit of talking to. It would be a great

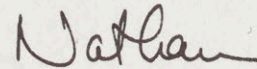
/cont.



Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner, cont.

disappointment to me if in ten years a new government were, despite our intentions of doing good, to reject in a demeaning way help that the Institute had offered its predecessor.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Nathan" or "N. Sivin". The script is cursive and somewhat stylized.

N. Sivin

enc.

cc: Dean Alfred Keil  
Dean Harold J. Hanham



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

TECHNOLOGY STUDIES  
Room 20D-212  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

14 February 1974

Prof. Gordon S. Brown  
MIT  
Room 4-234  
Cambridge, MA

Dear Gordon:

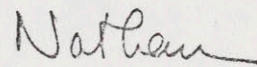
I finally received a copy of the summary of Hossein Nasr's technology and culture seminar. I want to give you my freshest reactions to it, so I will speak them into my dictating machine rather than waiting until I can reach you on the phone. As a whole, the summary exceeds in capturing what must have been for many of the large audience an extremely educational experience. What began as a man lecturing about the unity of intellect became a probing search of that unity as he was claiming to personify it. Hossein had two options. One was to avoid altogether the invitation to account for the connections between his spiritual and political lives. The other was to undertake that search publicly--a challenge which only a very exceptional teacher would dare to take up. I respect him greatly for having chosen to confront it. Whether he succeeded is another matter. I do not wish to judge, because I do not feel that I would have done better had I been in his place. What matters from the point of view of our discussion is that he chose to discuss politics. Reading the summary against my clear recollections of a moving evening, my considered judgment is that Johnny Crocker deserves gratitude for the delicacy and tact with which he insured that Hossein's part in the discussion was reported in such a way as to bring out and make clear its essential reasonableness. As for the appendix, it seems to me useful in underlining a point which most Americans would be unable to deduce from the summary--that many comments were prompted as much by religious as by political concerns. It may be useful for modern Americans to realize how these are linked in people from the Middle East whom we may facilely think we understand. Let me say almost the same thing in another way. It is easy for someone who reads the summary not only to dismiss many of the questions that were asked but to think of them as lightly asked, or as unrelated to each other. The appendix makes



it clear to anyone who has taken the trouble to read through the summary that all of those questions from the Iranian and Arab students converge on shared points of view. I would not endorse the content of the document itself. Since its heading does not imply that its content is endorsed by the seminar, by its steering committee, or by any particular participants, I do endorse its having been attached to the summary. Regardless of how unper-  
suasive or persuasive particular readers may find it, it seems to me to add considerably to the value of the summary as an educa-  
tional document.

I am sure you agree with me that we can allow no contra-  
diction between MIT's educational obligations as a university and  
its willingness to be of help to the Shah. I can envision no  
tempest in a teapot that good will and hard work cannot surmount.  
I can see no better insurance against real conflicts in the future  
than being well informed about the realities of Iranian politics--  
not as either the ins or outs see them, but as they are.

Yours sincerely,



N. Sivin

NS:bsp



# THE TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE SEMINAR AT M.I.T.

The Rev. John Crocker, Jr.  
*Episcopal Chaplain at M.I.T.*  
Convener

April 2, 1973

312 Memorial Drive  
Cambridge, Mass. 02138  
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## CONTEMPORARY MAN: BETWEEN THE RIM AND THE AXIS

Address: **S**AYYED HOSSEIN NASR, Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Philosophy, Arya-Mehr University  
Teheran, Iran

Respondents: NATHAN SIVIN, Professor of the History of Science and of Chinese Culture, M.I.T.

HUSTON SMITH, Professor of Philosophy,  
M.I.T.

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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I

ADDRESS

CONTEMPORARY MAN, BETWEEN THE RIM AND THE AXIS

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

"Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw,  
And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw:  
Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide  
Return, and back into your Sun subside."

--Farīd al-Dīn Ḥaṭṭār

"My Guru did not teach me but one precept. He told me, 'From the outward enter unto the most inward part of thy being.' That has become for me a rule." --Lallā, the Female Saint of Kashmir, Lallā Vakyani, 94

A.

Background: Our Alienation from the Center

The confrontation between man's own inventions and manipulations in the form of technology and human culture as well as the violent effect of the application of man's acquired knowledge of nature to the destruction of the natural environment have reached such proportions that many people in the modern world are at last beginning to question the validity of the conception of man held in the West since the rise of modern civilization. But to discuss such a vast problem in a meaningful and constructive way one cannot but begin by clearing the ground of the obstacles which usually prevent the profoundest questions involved from being discussed. Modern man has burned his hands in the fire which he himself has kindled by allowing himself to forget who he is. Having sold his soul, in the manner of Faust, in order to gain dominion over the natural environment, he has created a situation in which the very control of the environment is turning into its strangulation, bringing in its wake not only ecocide but also ultimately suicide. The danger is now evident enough not to need repetition. Whereas only two decades ago everyone spoke of man's unlimited possibility for development, understood in a physical and materialistic sense,



today one speaks of "limits to growth"--a title well-known to many people in the West today--or even of an imminent apocalypse. But the concepts and factors according to which the crisis is analyzed, the solutions sought after and even the colors with which the image of an impending doom are depicted are all in terms of the very elements that have brought the crisis of modern man into being. The world is still seen as devoid of a spiritual horizon, not because there is no such horizon present but because the subject who views the contemporary landscape is most often the type of man who lives at the rim of the circle of existence and therefore views all things from the periphery. He remains indifferent to the spokes and completely oblivious to the axis or the Center which remains ever accessible to him through the spokes of the wheel of existence.

The problem of the devastation brought upon the environment by technology, the ecological crisis and the like all issue from the malady of amnesia or forgetfulness from which modern man suffers. Modern man has simply forgotten who he is. Living on the periphery of his own existence he has been able to gain a quantitatively staggering knowledge of the world. He has projected the externalized and superficial image of himself upon the world.<sup>1/</sup> And then, having come to know the world in such externalized terms he has sought to reconstruct an image of himself based upon this external knowledge. There has been a series of "falls" by means of which man has oscillated in a descending scale between an ever more externalized image of himself and of the world surrounding him, moving ever further from the Center of both himself and of his cosmic environment. The inner history of the so-called development of modern man from his historic background as traditional man, who is at once his ancestor in time and his center in space, is a gradual alienation from the center and the axis through the spokes of the wheel of existence to the rim wherein resides modern man. But just as every rim presupposes spokes which connect it to the axis of the wheel, so does the very fact of human existence imply the presence of the center and the axis and hence an inevitable connection of men of all ages with Man



as such, with the anthropos, or al-insan al-kamil of Sufism, as he has been, is and will continue to be, above all outward changes and transformations.<sup>2/</sup>

Nowhere is the attempt to solve the problems caused by the various activities of modern man by refusing to consider the negative nature of the very factors that have caused these problems more evident than in the field of the humanities in general and the sciences dealing specifically with man, which are supposed to provide an insight into human nature. Modern man, having rebelled against heaven, created a science based not on the light of the intellect but on the powers of human reason sifting the data of the senses. But the success of this science was so great in its own domain that soon all the other sciences began to ape it, leading to the crass positivism of the past century which has caused philosophy as perennially understood to become confused with logical analysis, mental acrobatics or even mere information theory, and the classical fields of the humanities to become converted to quantified social sciences which make even the institutions of literature about the nature of man inaccessible to many students and seekers today. A number of scientists are in fact among those most critical of the pseudo-humanities being taught in many universities in an atmosphere of a psychological and mental inferiority complex vis-à-vis the sciences of nature and mathematics, a "humanities" which tries desperately to become "scientific," only to fall into a state of superficiality, not to say triviality.<sup>3/</sup> The decadence of the humanities in modern times is caused by the loss of the knowledge that man has always had directly of himself and also of his Self, and by reliance upon an externalized, indirect knowledge which modern man seeks to gain of himself from the outside, a literally "superficial" knowledge that is from the rim and is devoid of an awareness of the axis of the wheel and the spokes which stand always before man and connect him like a ray of light to the supernal sun.

It is with consideration of this background that the specific questions posed by this seminar must be analyzed and answered.<sup>14/</sup>



Scientific Knowledge Cannot Comprehend the Depths  
of Human Nature

The first query concerns the relation of small pieces of scientific evidence about human behavior to "human nature." In order to answer this question it is essential to remember that the reality of the human state cannot be exhausted by any of its outward projections. A particular human action or behavior always reflects a state of being, and its study can lead to a certain kind of knowledge of the state of being of the agent, provided there is already an awareness of the whole to which the fragment can be related. Fragmented knowledge of human behavior is related to human nature in the same way that waves of the sea are related to the sea. There is certainly a relationship between them that is both causal and substantial. But unless one has had a vision of the sea in its vastness and illimitable horizons, which reflect the Infinite and its inimitable peace and calm, one cannot gain an essential knowledge of the sea through the study of the waves. Fragmented knowledge can be related to the whole only when there is already an intellectual vision of the whole.

The careful "scientific" study of fragmented human behavior is incapable of revealing the profounder aspect of human nature precisely because of an a priori limitation that so much of modern behavioristic studies of man, a veritable conglomerate of pseudo-sciences if there ever was one,<sup>4/</sup> has placed on the meaning of the human state itself. There has never been as little knowledge of man, of the anthropos, in different human cultures as one finds among most modern anthropologists today. The medicine men of Africa have had a deeper insight into human nature than the modern behaviorists and their flock, because the former have been concerned with the essential and the latter with accidentals. Now, accidents do possess a reality, but have a meaning only in relation to the substance which supports them ontologically. Otherwise one could collect accidents and external facts indefinitely without ever reaching the substance or what is essential. The classical error of modern civilization to mistake the quantitative accumulation of information for qualitative penetration into the inner meaning of things applies here as elsewhere. The



study of fragmented behavior without a vision of the human nature which is the cause of this behavior cannot itself lead to a knowledge of human nature. It can go around the rim of the wheel indefinitely without even entering upon the spoke to approach the proximity of the axis and the Center. But if the vision is already present, the gaining of knowledge of external human behavior can always be an occasion for re-collection and a return to the cause by means of the external effect.

In Islamic metaphysics, four basic qualities are attributed to Ultimate Reality, based directly on the Quranic verse, "He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward" (LVII, 3). This attribution, besides other levels of meaning, also possesses a meaning that is directly pertinent to the present argument. God, the Ultimate Reality, is both the Inward (al-batin) and the Outward (al-zahir), the Center and the Circumference. The religious man sees God as the Inward; the profane man who has become completely oblivious to the world of the Spirit sees only the Outward, but precisely because of his ignorance of the center does not realize that even the Outward is a manifestation of the Center or of the Divine. Hence his fragmented knowledge remains incapable of seizing the whole of the rim or circumference and therefore by anticipation the Center. A segment of the rim remains nothing more than a figure without a point of reference or Center, but the whole rim cannot but reflect the Center. Finally the sage sees God as both the Inward and the Outward. He is able to relate the fragmented external knowledge to the Center and see in the rim a reflection of the Center. But this he is able to do only because of his a priori awareness of the Center. Before being able to see the external world--be it the physical world about us or the outer crust of the human psyche--as a manifestation of the Inward, one must already have become attached to the Inward through faith and knowledge.<sup>5/</sup> Applying this principle, a sage could thus relate fragmented knowledge to the deeper layer of human nature, but for one who has yet to become aware of the Inward dimension within himself and the



Universe about him, fragmented knowledge cannot but remain fragmentary, especially if the fragmentary knowledge of human behavior is based upon observation of the behavior of a human collectivity most of whose members themselves live only on the most outward layers of their being and whose behavior only rarely reflects the deeper dimension of their own being.

This last point leads to an observation that complements the discussion of principles already stated. Modern man lives for the most part in a world in which he encounters few people who live on the higher planes of consciousness or the deeper layers of their being. He therefore is for the most part aware of only certain types of human behavior. Fragmented knowledge of human behavior, even if based on external observation, could be an aid for modern man to become at least indirectly aware of other dimensions of human nature, provided a study is made of the behavior of traditional man, of the man who lives in a world with a Center. The behavior of traditional men of different societies, especially at the highest level of the saints and sages, be they from the Chinese or the Islamic or the North American Indian or any other traditional background, in the face of great trials, before death, in presence of the beauty of virgin nature and sacred art, or in the throes of love both human and divine can certainly provide indications of aspects of human nature for the modern observer. Such behavior can reveal a constancy and permanence of human nature that is truly astonishing and can also be instrumental in depicting the grandeur of human nature, which has become largely forgotten in a world where man has become a prisoner of the pettiness of his own trivial creations and inventions. Seen in this light a fragmented knowledge of human behavior can aid in gaining a knowledge of certain aspects of human nature. But in any case a total knowledge of human nature cannot but be achieved through a knowledge of the Center or axis, which also "contains" the spokes and the rim. A famous saying of the Prophet of Islam states, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." But precisely because "himself" implies the



Self which resides at the Center of man's being, from another point of view this statement can also be reversed and it can be stated that man can know himself completely only in the light of God, for the relative cannot be known save with respect to the Absolute.

C.

Scientific Objectivity Need Not Contradict the Permanent  
and Universal in Human Nature

The second query to which we must address ourselves concerns the relationship of scientific "objectivity" and its findings to the criteria of "the universal and the unchanging" implied by the phrase "human nature." To answer this query it is necessary before all else to define once again what is meant by scientific "objectivity," especially when it concerns the study of man. It has become commonplace, at least for non-specialists in the philosophy of science, to attribute objectivity to modern science almost as if the one implied the other. No doubt modern science possesses a limited form of "objectivity" in its study of the physical world, but even in this domain this "objectivity" is encompassed by the collective subjectivity of a particular humanity at a certain moment of its historical existence when the symbolist spirit has become atrophied and the gift of seeing the world of the spirit through and beyond the physical world has been nearly completely lost. Even in the physical world all that cannot be caught in the net of modern science, to quote the well-known image of A. Eddington, is collectively neglected, and its non-existence vowed for "objectivity." It is as if an audience of deaf people testified together that they did not hear any music from musicians playing before them and considered the unanimity of their opinion as a proof of its objectivity.

Now if in the domain of the physical world itself the concept of the so-called "objectivity" of modern science must be employed with great prudence and the qualitative and symbolic aspects of nature not neglected because of their lying outside the "objectively" defined world view of modern science, so much more does this "objectivity" need to be re-considered in the field of the study of man. The applying of the methods of the physical sciences in the study of man have enabled scientists to gather a great deal of information about men of all ages and climes but little about



man himself, for the simple reason that the philosophical background of modern science, which goes back ultimately to Cartesianism, is incapable of providing the necessary background for the study of man. Already in the 17th century the body-mind dualism of Decartes perverted in the European mind the image of the much more profound tripartite division of the being of man consisting of corpus, anima and spiritus expounded so fully in the Hermetic tradition. To this error a worse illusion was added in the 19th century which prevented even the collecting of facts about men of different ages from becoming a way of reaching at least some form of knowledge of man himself.

This illusion is that of evolution as it is usually understood today. Evolution is no more than a scientific hypothesis that has been parading around for the past century as a scientific fact, despite the lack of the least amount of proof of its having taken place in the biological plane and despite its being usually taught in schools as proven fact. The present discussion does not allow our entering into debates about biological evolution, although writings by biologists and geologists against it, especially works written during recent years, are far from being few in number.<sup>6/</sup> But as far as the study of man is concerned, it is precisely the intrusion of the idea of evolution into anthropology that has made the positive relation which scientifically accumulated facts could have had to an understanding of the universal and unchanging aspect of "human nature" well nigh impossible. Scientists and scholars in the fields of anthropology, the social sciences and even the humanities are trained almost completely to study only change. Any alteration, no matter how trivial, is more often than not considered as a significant change, while the immutable is almost unconsciously identified with the unimportant or the dead. It is as if man were trained to study only the movement of clouds and to remain completely oblivious of the sky with its immutable and infinite expanses which provides the matrix for the observations of the cloud movements. No wonder that so much of the study of man provided by modern disciplines is really no



more than a study of triviality producing most often petty results and failing at almost every step to predict anything of significance in the social order. Many a simple traditional folk tale reveals more about man than thick tomes provided with pages of statistics on what is usually described as "vital changes." In fact the only vital change that is occurring today is the ever greater alienation of man from his own permanent nature and a forgetfulness of this nature, a forgetfulness which cannot but be ephemeral and is bound to have catastrophic effects upon that type of man who has chosen to forget who he is. But this is precisely the one change which "objective" scientific methods are incapable of studying.

Yet, in principle, there is no necessary contradiction between scientific facts accumulated objectively and the concept of "human nature" with its permanent and universal implications. Were the impediments of that mental deformation called evolutionary thinking, which is neither "objective" nor scientific, to be removed, the accumulation of facts about man would display in a blindingly evident fashion the extra-spatial and extra-temporal character of man, if not beyond history--for this would lie beyond the reach of facts--at least in periods of history and in various regions of the world. Such an exercise would depict human nature as something constant and permanent, from which at certain moments of history and among certain peoples there have been deviations and departures that have soon been removed by tragedies or catastrophes leading to a re-establishment of the norm. The sacred books such as the Quran contain, besides other levels of meaning, a "history" of the human soul which emphasize in a majestic fashion this conception of human nature.<sup>7/</sup> That is why the goal that is placed before man in all sacred books is to know and to return to the norm, to man's permanent and original nature, the fiṭrah of the Quran. As the Tao-te Ching (XIX) states, "Realize thy Simple Self. Embrace thy Original Nature." For the goal of man cannot be but the knowledge of himself, of who he is.



"He who knows others is wise;  
He who knows himself is enlightened."

--Tao-te Ching, XXXIII

Or to quote a Western contemplative,

"If the mind would fain ascend to the height of science,  
let its first and principal study be to know itself."

--Richard of St. Victor

D.

Scientific Knowledge is Not "Essential"

In the light of the understanding which both revelation and intellectual vision have provided over the ages concerning the nature of man, the answer to the question "Can we know that any scientific knowledge we may gain captures something essential about man?" can only be the following: We cannot gain essential knowledge of man through any method that is based on an externalization of man's inner being and then the placing of this externalized man, of the man who stands at the rim of the wheel of existence, as the subject that knows. If essential has any meaning at all it must be related to the essence, to the center or axis which generates at once the spokes and the rim. Only the higher can comprehend the lower, for to comprehend means literally to encompass, and only that which stands on a higher level of existence can encompass that which lies below it. Man is composed of body, psyche and intellect, the latter being at once above man and the center of his being. The essence of man, that which is essential to human nature, can be understood only by the intellect, through the "eye of the heart" as traditionally understood, the intellect which is once at the center of man's being and encompasses all of his other levels of existence. Once the eye of the heart becomes closed and the faculty of intellection, in its original sense, atrophied, it is not possible to gain an essential knowledge of man. The reflection of the intellect upon the plane of the psyche and the mind, which is reason, can never reach the essence of man or for that matter the essence of anything else, no matter how much it concerns itself with experiment and observation or how far it carries out its proper function of division and analysis, the legitimate and rightful function of ratio. It can gain



peripheral knowledge of accidents, of effects, of external behavior, but not of the essence. Reason, once divorced from the guiding light of the intellect, can at best confirm the existence of the noumena, of the essences of things, as we see in the philosophy of Kant, but it cannot know that essence. The knowledge that is essential is one that is ultimately based on the identity of the knower and the known, on being consumed by the fire of knowledge itself. Man is at a particular vantage point to know one thing in essence, and that is Himself, were he only to overcome the illusion of taking, to use Vedantic terms, the externalized and objectivized image of himself for his real Self, the Self which cannot be externalized because of its very nature. Scientific knowledge, like any other form of knowledge which is based by definition on the distinction between a subject that knows and an object that is known, must of necessity remain content with a knowledge that is peripheral and not essential.

E.

The Proper Relation of Science and Other Ways of Knowing about Human Nature: Only the Greater Can Embrace the Lesser

One naturally is led to ask what is the relationship of particular scientific research to the quest for other kinds of knowledge about mankind in general. A relation of a legitimate and meaningful kind can exist provided the correct proportion and relation between ways of knowing is kept in mind. And that is possible only if a knowledge that transcends science, as currently understood, is accepted. The rim can serve as a point of access to the axis and the Center only if it is taken for what it really is, namely the rim. Once the fact that the rim is the periphery is forgotten the center also ceases to possess meaning and becomes inaccessible. Were a true metaphysics, a scientia sacra, to be once again a living reality in the West, knowledge gained of man through scientific research could be integrated into a pattern which would also embrace other forms of knowledge ranging from the purely metaphysical to those derived from traditional schools of psychology and cosmology. But in the field of the sciences of man, as in that of the sciences of nature, the great impediment is precisely the monolithic and monopolistic character which modern Western science has displayed since the 17th century.



Putting aside the great deal of pseudo-science and simply erroneous theories prevalent in the modern sciences of man such as anthropology and psychology, the elements that are based on careful observation of human behavior or the human psyche under different circumstances could be related, without any logical contradictions, to what traditional schools of psychology such as those found in Sufism, or Yoga or Zen, have also discovered about the human psyche, and especially certain aspects of it of which most modern men remain totally unaware.<sup>8/</sup> But this is possible only if the concept of man in his totalities of the "universal man" (al-insān al-kāmil) of Islamic esotericism as expounded in traditional metaphysics is accepted, for as mentioned already, only the greater can embrace the lesser. But to claim to know the human psyche without the aid of the Spirit (or the Intellect) and to claim a finality for this knowledge as a "truly scientific knowledge" that is independent of any other form of knowledge cannot but result in the impasse with which the modern world is faced today. It can only end in a truncated and incomplete, not to say outright erroneous, "science of man," which is asked to play a role for which it has no competence and which is most often more dangerous than ignorance pure and simple, for there is nothing more dangerous than a simple ignorance except an ignorance which has pretensions of being knowledge and wisdom. Scientific research into the nature of man can possess a constructive relationship to the universal and perennial ways of knowing man only if it realizes its own limitations and does not seek to transgress the limits inherent in its approach. It can be legitimate only if it is able to overcome the "totalitarian rationalism" inherent in modern science<sup>9/</sup>--although not accepted by many scientists--and accept to become what it really is, namely a limited and particular way of knowing things through observation of their external aspects, of phenomena, and of ratiocination based upon this empirical contact with things; a way that would be acceptable if taken for what it is, because things do also possess a face turned toward the external and the exteriorized.



The answer to the question of what is the worth of scientific research as a source of universal or essential knowledge about man must then be that it is worthless if considered as a source. How can a knowledge which negates the universal order in the metaphysical sense and denies the possibility of essential knowledge serve as a source of knowledge that is essential and universal? Scientific research can become a source of essential knowledge provided it becomes a form of scientia sacra, as already mentioned, provided "scientific" is understood in the traditional sense of a knowledge that issues from and leads to the center of the principal order.

There is, however, one way in which scientific research can aid in gaining an awareness of something essential about the present predicament of man, if not of man's eternal nature. This is to make use of the method that science employs in carrying out experiments to study modern scientific industrial civilization itself. In science whenever an experiment does not succeed, it is discontinued no matter how much effort has been put into the experiment, and an attempt is made to learn from the errors which were responsible for the lack of success of the experiment.

Modern civilization as it has developed in the West since the Renaissance is an experiment<sup>10/</sup> that has failed and in fact failed in such an abysmal fashion as to put into doubt the possibility of a future for man to seek other ways. It would be most "unscientific" today to consider this civilization with all the presumptions about the nature of man and the Universe which lie at its basis as anything other than an experiment that has failed. And in fact "scientific" research if not atrophied by that totalitarian reign of rationalism and empiricism alluded to above should be the easiest way of enabling contemporary man to realize that modern civilization has failed precisely because the premises upon which it has been based were false, because this civilization has been based on a concept of man which excludes what is most essential to the human state.



F.

The Modern Spiritual Crisis: Man's Presumption to Play God

Paradoxically enough, the awareness of the shortcomings of modern civilization has dawned upon the general Western public-- not upon the small intellectual elite who spoke of the crisis facing the modern world as far back as over half a century ago<sup>11/</sup>-- not because of a sudden realization of man's forgotten nature but because of the rapid decay of the natural environment. It is a symptom of the mentality of modern man that the deep spiritual crisis which has been making the very roots of his soul gradually wither away had to come to his attention through a crisis within the physical environment.

During the past few years so much has been written about the environmental and ecological crisis that there is no need here to emphasize the dimension of the problems involved. The famous study that has emanated from M.I.T., namely Limits to Growth, has sought to apply the very methods of modern science to a study of the effects of the application of this science in the future, and the authors of that work as well as many others seriously concerned with the ecological crisis have proposed a change in man's concept of growth, a return to non-material pursuits, a satisfaction with fewer material objects and many other well-meaning changes. But very few have realized that the pollution of the environment is no more than the after-effect of a pollution of the human soul which came into being the moment Western man decided to play the role of the Divinity upon the surface of the Earth and chose to exclude the transcendent dimension from his life.<sup>12/</sup>

In this late hour of human history there are two tragedies we observe, one in the West and the other in the East. In the Occident where the crisis of modern civilization which is after all the product of the West, is most fully felt, since it is related usually to the environmental crisis, solutions are proposed which contain the very factors that led to the crisis in the first place. Men are asked to discipline their passions, to be rational humanists, to be considerate to their neighbors, both human and non-human. But few realize that these injunctions



are impossible to carry out as long as there is no spiritual power to curb the infernal and passionate tendencies of the human soul. It is the very humanist conception of man that has dragged him to the infra-human. It is as a result of an ignorance of what man is, of the possibilities of the depth of darkness as well as the heights of illumination that he carries within himself, that such facile solutions are proposed. For millenia religions have taught men to avoid evil and to cultivate virtue. Modern man sought to destroy first the power of religion over his soul and then to question even the meaning of evil and sin. Now many propose as a solution to the environmental crisis a return to traditional virtues, although usually they do not describe them in such terms, because most of them remain secular and propose that the life of men should continue to be divorced from the sacred. It might be said that the environmental crisis, as well as the psychological unbalance, of so many men and women and the ugliness of the urban environment and the like, are the results of the attempt of man to live by bread alone, to "kill all the gods" and announce his independence of heaven. But man cannot escape the effect of his actions, which are themselves the fruit of his present state of being. His only hope is to cease to be the rebellious creature he has become, to make peace with both heaven and earth and to submit himself to the Divine. This itself would be tantamount to ceasing to be modern as this term is usually understood, to a death and a rebirth. That is why this dimension of the problem is rarely considered in general discussions of the environmental crisis. The missing dimension of the ecological debate is the role and nature of man himself and the spiritual transformation he must undergo if he is to solve the crisis he himself has participated.

The second tragedy, which is that occurring in the East, or more generally in the non-Western world, is that that world for the most part is repeating the very errors which have led to the failure of urban-industrial society and modern civilization that has produced it, whereas its attitude toward the West should



be to view it as a case study to learn from rather than a model to emulate blindly. Of course the politico-economic and military pressures from the industrialized world upon the non-Western world are so great as to make many decisions impossible and many choices well nigh excluded. But there is no excuse for committing certain acts whose negative results are obvious and in having no more reason for undertaking this or that project than the fact that it has been carried out in the West. The earth cannot support the mistakes committed by Western civilization again, and it is most unfortunate that no present day power on earth has a wide enough perspective as to have the well-being of the whole earth and its inhabitants in mind.

Of these two tragedies, certainly the first overshadows the second, for it is action carried out in the modernized, industrialized world that affects more directly the rest of the globe. For example, were the ecological crisis really to be taken seriously by any of the major industrial powers in their economic and technological policies, it would have an immeasurable influence upon those who of necessity emulate these powers in such fields. How different would the future of man be if the West were to remember again who man is before the East forgets the knowledge it has preserved over the ages about the real nature of man!

G.

#### The Call from the Center

What contemporary man needs, amidst this morass of confusion and disorder of both a mental and physical order which surrounds him, is first and foremost a message as to who man is, but a message that comes from the Center and defines the rim vis-à-vis the Center. This message is still available in a living form in the Eastern traditions and can be resuscitated within the Western tradition. But wherever this message be found, whether in the East or the West, if it issues from the Center, it is always a call for man who lives on the periphery and the rim of the wheel of existence to follow the spokes to the axis or Center which is at once the Origin of himself and of all things. It is a call for man to realize who he is and to become aware of that spark of eternity which he contains within himself. "There is



in every man an incorruptible star, a substance called upon to become crystallized in immortality; it is eternally prefigured in the lumunious proximity of the Self. Man disengages this star from its temporal entanglements in truth, in prayer and in virtue, and in them alone."<sup>13/</sup> He who has crystallized this star is at peace with both himself and the world. Only in seeking to transcend the world and to become a star in the spiritual firmament is man able to live in harmony with the world and to solve the problems that terrestrial existence by its very nature imposes upon him during this fleeting journey in the temporal which comprises his life on earth.



NOTES:

1/ It must be remembered that, in the West, first man rebelled against Heaven with the humanism of the Renaissance and only later did the modern sciences come into being. The humanistic anthropology of the Renaissance was a necessary background for the scientific revolution on the 17th century and the creation of a science which, although in one sense is non-human, is in another sense the most anthropomorphic form of knowledge possible, for it makes human reason and the empirical data based upon the human senses the sole criteria for the validity of all knowledge.

Concerning the gradual disfiguration of the image of man in the West see G. Durand, "Défiguration philosophique et figure traditionnelle de l'homme en Occident," Eranos-Jahrbuch, XXXVIII, 1969, pp. 45-93.

2/ If such a relation did not exist, it would not even be possible for man to identify himself with other periods of human history, much less for the permanent aspects of human nature to manifest themselves even in the modern world as they have in the past and continue to do so today.

3/ Certain American scholars such as William Arrowsmith have already criticized what could be called the "pollution of the humanities," but the tendency here as in the pollution of the environment is mostly to try to remove the ill effects without curing the underlying causes.

4/ In modern times the occult sciences, whose metaphysical principles have been forgotten, have become known as the pseudo-sciences, while in reality they contain a profound doctrine concerning the nature of man and the cosmos. Much of the social and human sciences today on the contrary veil and hide a total ignorance of human nature with a scientific garb and are in a sense the reverse of the occult sciences.



5/ This theme is thoroughly analyzed by F. Schuon in his Dimensions of Islam, translated by P. Townsend, London, 1970, Chapter 2. Concerning the sage or the Sufi he writes, "The Sufi lives under the gaze of al-Awwal (the first), al-Ākhir (the last), az-Zāhir (the Outward) and al-Bāṭin (the Inward). He lives concretely in these metaphysical dimensions as ordinary creatures move in space and time, and as he himself moves in so far as he is a mortal creature. He is consciously the point of intersection where the Divine dimensions meet; unequivocally engaged in the universal drama, he suffers no illusions about impossible avenues of escape, and he never situates himself in the fallacious 'extra-territoriality' of the profane, who imagine that they can live outside spiritual Reality, the only reality there is." pp. 36-37.

6/ See for example, L. Bonnoure, Déterminisme et finalité, double loi de la vie, Paris, 1957; his Recherche d'une doctrine de la vie, Paris, 1964; and D. Dewar, The Transformist Illusion, Murfreesboro, 1957. See also S. H. Nasr, The Encounter of Man and Nature, The Spritual Crisis of Modern Man, London, 1968, pp. 124 ff, where works and views opposed to evolution are discussed.

7/ For the episodes of the Quran considered as event of the human soul and its inner "history" see F. Schuon, Understanding Islam, translated by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963 and Baltimore, (Penguin Metaphysical Series), 1972, chapter two.

8/ Unfortunately very few serious studies based on the traditional point of view, which alone matters, have been made as yet of the traditional psychological sciences of the various Oriental traditions, sciences which can be understood only in the light of metaphysical principles and can be practiced only with the aid of the spiritual grace present in a living tradition. See A. K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or rather Pneumatology," in Selected Writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, ed. by R. Lipsey, Princeton, (in press).

9/ F. Schuon, Light on the Ancient Worlds, translated by Lord Northbourne, London, 1965, p. 117.



10/ "But, properly, urban industrialism must be regarded as an experiment. And if the scientific spirit has taught us anything of value, it is that honest experiments may well fail. When they do, there must be a radical reconsideration, one which does not flinch even at the prospect of abandoning the project. Surely as of the mid-twentieth century, urban-industrialism is proving to be such a failed experiment, bringing in its wake every evil that progress was to vanquish." T. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society, Garden City, New York, 1973, p. XXIV of introduction.

11/ Such men as R. Guénon in his Crisis of the Modern World, translated by M. Pallis and R. Nicholson, London, 1962, whose original French edition first appeared in 1927, followed by other traditional authors, especially F. Schuon and A. K. Coomaraswamy, have written extensively during the past few decades on the crisis of the West on the basis of the application of perennial metaphysical criteria to the contemporary situation. But their writings were ignored in academic circles for a long time and continue to be so to a large extent even today. The crisis had to appear on the physical level in order to bring the dangerous tendencies of modern civilization before the eyes of modern man.

12/ We have dealt with this theme extensively in our The Encounter of Man and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man.

"What, after all, is the ecological crisis that now captures so much belated attention but the inevitable extroversion of a blighted psyche? Like inside, like outside. In the eleventh hour, the very physical environment suddenly looms up before us as the outward mirror of our inner condition, for many the first discernible symptom of advanced disease within." T. Roszak, *Op. Cit.*, p. XVII of introduction.

13/ F. Schuon, Light on the Ancient Worlds, p. 117.



### III

#### RESPONDENTS

##### A

NATHAN SIVIN

##### 1.

#### The Environmental Crisis Is Not Only a Modern Western Crisis

First of all a disagreement with Hossein, who has been a friend of mine for decades. It does not seem to me that the crisis of the environment is characteristic of the Occident. We should be aware that the degree of wholeness in the greatest intellects of a culture seems to have very little to do with the destructiveness toward the environment or the general spiritual devastation that is possible in a civilization at large. There are many examples, but I will only mention two from Asia. One is in China. Notwithstanding the beautiful ideals expressed in the philosophical book of Taoism, the Tao te ching (The Way and Its Power), poetry, and painting, it happens to be true that North China was practically denuded of trees by the year 1125. Second, in Kyoto, which must have been one of the most beautiful cities in the world, there are still small oases of peace and incomparable beauty available within walking distance of almost any point in the city. That offsets, but cannot redeem, the general devastation of noise, dirt, pollution and crowding. Around the center of town in more-or-less a circle about a quarter-mile in radius large signs are posted on all the streets which say, "The carbon monoxide concentration at Shijo Kawaramachi (the main intersection) is very high. Danger! Turn back." I have never seen anybody turn back.

So, I would suggest that the split consciousness, the double intellect, that we all to some extent suffer from, and that takes tremen-



dous spiritual labor to overcome in any civilization--is very unlikely to be cured by fiat or upon demand, by legislation or by the recommendations of committees or people, no matter how eminent they may be - even as theologians. This is something that we can only settle one by one through our own work.

2.

The Motive, Method and Meaning of Alchemy

I would like to talk in a very simple way about a point that Hossein Nasr made earlier more analytically, coming as he did from a scientific education. It is something that seems to me to be a useful clue. After a rather chaotic and protracted undergraduate career, I put together the few things that I knew a little about, namely the history and philosophy of science, the Chinese language, and a certain amount of nearly forgotten chemistry and decided to study the history of Chinese alchemy for a doctoral dissertation: in other words, to write the equations, because there was no doubt in my mind then that alchemy was a kind of primitive chemistry. I read all the books; there are only about a hundred of them. As I did so, I gradually realized that I failed to understand about nine tenths of what was being said. By now I have read those books many times and I think I am just beginning to understand what they are about. So let me say briefly what I see in them.

In the first place there are unquestionably chemical reactions, which are clearly being done in laboratories. The procedures are often as clear and specific as what you find in many university laboratory handbooks. Much of it survives testing against what a chemist knows.

There is a specific reaction--it seems to be a type of reaction which is universal in large parts of Chinese alchemy--which involves sealing two compounds together in a closed vessel, heating them for a



very long time, combining, reseparating, and recombining them. Now, if you have read about any kind of alchemy, the pattern looks familiar. What I had taken, on my first reading, to be gobbledy-gook was actually a clear explanation of what was being done. What it was saying, using the language of Yin and Yang--a special technical language, but its meaning is rather universal in philosophy--, was that change takes place in the cosmos through cyclical patterns whose ups and downs are complementary. They fit together and they make together, seen from their center, the totality of existence. This is true in the birth, growth, maturing, decay and death of the mayfly; and it is true for minerals which grow and mature over the ages in the womb of the earth, as any European miner could have told you as late as 1900--I do not think people have that sense anymore while they are strip-mining today. And what governs all these individual life cycles, that make up what seems to be such a chaotic universe in our experience, is a regularity which underlies them, a regularity which we can see in the sky: the regularities of the cycle of day and night, of the year, and the greater astronomical cycles. The name for the dynamic cyclic behavior of the cosmos in Chinese philosophy is the Tao.

Now, as you know, in Chinese philosophy Yin and Yang are paired and complementary opposites which go together so that one increases when the other decreases in intensity, a very natural model of alternating process. In Chinese alchemy you find the basic ingredients are paired, usually mercury and sulfur or cinnabar and silver, and specifically identified with the energy of Yin and Yang. You seal them in a vessel, which is described in China as a cosmic egg, as what the cosmos hatches out of. In fact, China is the only place I know where this process is utterly literal for several treatises direct you actually to seal



the ingredients inside an egg!

Then you heat them according to processes which telescope time. It is one of the basic ideas of Chinese alchemy that minerals mature naturally inside the earth in a period of 4320 years. Since there are also 4320 Chinese double hours (each two of our hours) in a round or ritual year of 360 days, an appropriate procedure will telescope a year into a day. How do you do that? By a procedure (which we would consider today to be symbolic if we did not think too deeply about them) which is precisely quantitative: you take the ingredients and put them into a special furnace, which is specifically oriented in respect to the cosmos, and you start heating them while measuring the amount of charcoal you burn: the first day it is two ounces, the second day three ounces, the fourth day four ounces and so on up to seven, and then back down 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2,; and you keep going up and down. What you are actually doing is making a model of the up-and-down change of the cycle of heat in the year, which is representative of the cosmic cycles.

Now what is all this for? To enable the alchemist to contemplate a temporally telescoped model of the great cosmic processes whose time base in nature is so long that no person can experience the whole of it.

This is an almost trivial example of a very familiar theme in Chinese science and, I think, in the sciences of almost any traditional society. The search for systematic knowledge--and you can find a great deal of it, even quantitative, in Chinese alchemy-- was coupled with a unitary view of human experience - uniting the empirical, the theoretical, the moral and the visionary - that we in the West have long since discarded. This view was set aside as part of a historical process which began in the minds of people like Galileo and Descartes,



who formulated the realm of modern science so as to define a "safe" area in which the Church would not invoke its authority over matters pertaining to the soul and to spiritual experience.

I think that no simple public process, no act of legislation or earnest search by any constituted body, will revive the whole vision of nature that you find among the Sufi contemplators; that is what Hossein Nasr has described to us. That vision is difficult for a modern American to follow, because he was using the shorthand of a tradition that has been discussing these kinds of technical problems familiarly for many centuries. This high level was attained, sustained and carried forward because it rested on a body of belief shared throughout the society. Hossein Nasr mentioned earlier that traditional man is attached to the transcendent. This is true for everybody in traditional societies so long as they remain traditional. It would have been meaningless to ask of a person in Medieval China whether he or she believed in Taoism or Buddhism. Chinese folk religion, which naive historians tend to confuse with these elite systems of belief, was nothing more than the ritual manifestation of community. We today no longer have that capacity to manifest and reaffirm community. If it is to be reinvented in our time we will probably have to depend for the needed insight upon independent individuals who are in touch with traditions where it is still alive to some degree. This, we could probably agree, explains to some extent the current interest in perspectives which do not see mysticism, contemplation, and ecstasy as aberrant. My own view is that old solutions will not be of much direct use for modern problems. If there is help for us in that quest, it is less likely to come from the publicists who distort Oriental philosophy to meet media demands than from the poets who have kept intact a feeling of oneness with nature, and who can relate their own mystical



traditions as well as those of the Orient to it. In American culture one sees this as a living movement in touch with its past only in poets. So I will end with a few lines from a poem of Gary Snyder, who can make any arcanum Old American:

"Eastward from here,  
beyond Buddha-worlds ten times as  
numerous as the sands of the Ganges  
there is a world called  
PURE AS LAPIS LAZULI,  
its Buddha is called Master of Healing,  
AZURE RADIANCE TATHAGATA"

it would take you twelve thousand summer vacations  
driving a car due east all day every day  
to reach the edge of the Lapis Lazuli realm of  
Medicine Old Man Buddha -

East, Old Man Realm  
East across the sea, yellow sand land  
Coyote old man land  
Silver, and stone blue

B

HUSTON SMITH

Questions on "The Axis", the Role of Philosophy,  
and the Definition of Science

Listening carefully to Hossein Nasr, I did not hear one point that I disagreed with, so I do not have any critical questions. But during supper two students asked me questions and what he would say to them, so I will ask those questions as my own.



The first of these has to do with the image used by Nasr in his title. The Rim became quite clear, and in another mode of clarity so perhaps did what he called the Center. But what is the Axis in that symbolism?

The second question is this: What if anything is the role of philosophy in this whole quest for learning and understanding?

And I guess I will add one of my own, namely, How would you, as an historian of science, define science? Or, what are the multiple ways of defining it? I know that you have written about that because we do not have a counterpart in English for Wissenschaft, much less scientia, and these two concepts, along with others, all go by the name of "science".

SIVIN: May I add that many people here may not have realized that Nasr was using the term "humanism" in a precise, technical sense. So it might be helpful if he defined it again.



## NASR'S RESPONSE

Both respondents tonight are men who share with me the same universe of discourse, for which I am grateful, because perhaps it is more meaningful to converse in the same language than to speak across barriers which keep both sides really unaware of what the other is saying. The late Dylan Thomas once said at M.I.T. that, "Englishmen and Americans are facing the barrier of a common language"; I hope we can avoid that problem tonight!

## 1.

The Nature of the Environmental Crisis  
and the New Response to It

Professor Sivin raised a point with which I could not agree more, that the environmental crisis is certainly not in the West alone. Anyone who walks in the streets of Tokyo early in the afternoon will certainly realize this. But this does not change my major argument, that civilization has brought this crisis about, that it had its period of incubation and early growth in the West, and, as I have said, during the last century has spread to all parts of the world.

Secondly, the environmental crisis which this civilization has brought about is of a very different order from all the trees that the goats have eaten in Palestine or all the trees that have been cut by Spaniards in southern Spain or all the trees that have been uprooted in northern China, precisely because of the difference in tempo and the difference in attitude of man towards nature. And to prove this, it is enough to cite one single fact, and that is that all of the important national parks in the United States,



which are preserved today as a sign or remnant of virgin nature, were precisely the places where human beings have lived for the past few thousand years. You can see the tracks of American Indians on the top of the Rocky Mountain National Park and the Sierra Nevada and the Yellowstone, these three which I walked over practically foot by foot when I was a student. And therefore the amount of desecration and destruction of nature which they did without a doubt over thousands of years of existence cannot be compared with the very rapid way in which, for example, the Hudson River has been polluted in only one century. There is an entirely new dimension to the catastrophe which the contact between man and nature has brought about.

2.

How the Change of Attitude Towards Nature Has Come About

I think that the change of tempo, although quantitative, has brought about a very significant change in attitude. This can be seen by the fact that when Nathan Sivin and I were students at M.I.T., nobody in the United States ever thought that the environmental problem was of any importance: a few mockingbirds would die, and a few animals in the North would disappear; so what! This had nothing to do with the well-being of man on the surface of the earth.

And the crisis that has come about (although certainly legislation will not lead to self-awareness, as Sivin put it so well) has shown to many intelligent people that they are following a road which leads to a dead end. And when this happens, there usually is a psychological shock which can bring about a profound difference of attitude in people: if a bird has been flapping its



wings upon the earth instead of upward to fly, and suddenly realizes this, the earth itself does not move, but this realization brings about a change of orientation within the bird that causes the same wings which had been striking the ground to move towards the air and there to enable the bird to fly. What has taken place, I think, in the West is that many things which only ten to fifteen years ago were practically impossible to say to a large audience, which appeared as absurd, are now taken much more seriously.

I alluded in my talk to a small group of people who fifty years ago made a profound criticism of the modern world, not based at all on the crisis of the environment or the like, but on other principles, but no one ever read these people. To cite just one example, the famous book of René Guenon, The Crisis of the Modern World, was written in 1927, and if you ever read that book, (it is now a Penguin Book), you will find that many of the things which have occurred in the past twenty years or so were, in a sense, mentioned, but no one in the American world had heard of Guenon. When we were students, the profounder criticisms of what was going on were confined to five or six people here or there, and you had to go to Widener Library to find them! And the major change which has caused many people to become interested in another way of seeing things came essentially from the shock they received upon realizing that the material development that everyone believed to be the future of mankind is not so safe after all. There is no doubt that when informed people say, as in the Environmental Handbook, that we have a decade to decide on a sane policy, or else, if things continue like this, in the year 2020 we are going to have a breakdown of things, people are made to think of the possibility of other ways



of access to reality and other ways of pursuing their life. The environmental crisis will do no more than that. But outside of that, as Professor Sivin has said, and I agree completely, always whatever occurs has to be done through the individual and inwardly. You cannot legislate spirituality; there is no doubt about that.

3.

The Leadership of the Intellectual Elite  
Is Essential to Change

Something that is very essential is that in traditional civilizations you always had a population, a mass of people, for whom the universe of a sacred nature was taken for granted. In fact, you still see this in most of the cultures of Asia. Of course, this situation does not exist in the West. Let's not forget the famous Arabic proverb that "the fish always begins to stink from its head" or the famous Latin proverb that "the corruption of the best is the worst". The process of this type of event which occurred in the West was that the intelligentsia were the first ones that began to doubt the spiritual significance of life. If you had lived in the seventeenth century in England or in seventeenth century France where Descartes was proposing his philosophy based upon radical doubt, a self-centered philosophy which placed the reason of man at the center as the major or only criterion for the truth, the vast number of people were still living in the age of faith. Even today after four centuries when you discuss the doubt of Western man and his having fallen into this or that state, you are still speaking about a small number of people in certain countries.



Even in Western Europe in, say, a country like Germany a good number of people do not share the doubts of a Nietzsche or a Schopenhauer or fall into the nihilism of the modern existentialists and the like. So the important thing is precisely the intellectual elite.

The modern Anglo-Saxon conception of education with its emphasis on democracy is a very un-educational idea. You cannot have democratic education, otherwise M.I.T. would not exist. M.I.T. and all universities like this are based on an aristocratic idea of education, with aristocracy based upon intelligence: this is why some people get in and others don't, why some have "cums" of five and other flunk out, obviously. But despite this prejudice that we have against differences in levels of understanding, there is no doubt that there is always an intellectual elite that leads a society. And if there is any hope for reparation of the present situation, it will certainly come through the few. And in this I would agree with Sivin that you cannot have the expectation of a sudden mass uprising of interest in another world view; it will definitely come through the few who write, who influence a greater number, and they in turn influence a greater number, and so reverse the process which has occurred from the sixteenth century onwards in the other direction.

4.

Poetry Is an Expression of a Way of Being

Professor Sivin concluded by quoting the poetry of Mr. Snyder, which I thought was very telling. A person can never learn anything except through example, and this is especially true when one speaks about a wisdom which is supposed to be incarnate and a living thing. The reason you have so many gurus coming from the East today who



are being followed by so many in the West--and most of them are really revenging what the West did to the East in the nineteenth century; that is, most of them are essentially reaping the fruit of an honest need in the West, but for their own purposes which are very far from being honest or genuine!--is because people here are tired of the divorce between practice and theoria, between the way of saying things and thinking of things and the way of doing them. In fact, the great tragedy of what happened in Western philosophy is precisely a divorce between the said and the done. The idea that many young people in the West have today is precisely of a philosophy that is wed to a way of being. And poetry is always a reflection of that being. And I agree that most of all it is through poetry, not poetry in its technical sense of rhyming couplets or blank verse, but through a way of expressing what one is rather than what one thinks, that any guidance will come about, if it does come about.

5.

The Meaning of the "Axis"

As for the questions posed by Professor Smith, the first had to do with the meaning of the "axis" in the symbol of the circle, which I mentioned. The axes, of course, are obviously paths to the center, and the symbol I have used is drawn from a well-known, although little explained in Western sources, symbol explained by the founder of the Shādhili Sufi Order in North Africa, in which man is considered to be a point on the rim of the circle, and each man is connected by an axis emanating from that point under him to the center, as a path which leads from him to the Divine Center.



And oftentimes the famous saying of the prophet of Islam, "There are as many paths to God as there are children of Adam", is cited to show that there are as many axes as there are points on the rim. Of course, in a more practical way, they are ways for contemporary man to achieve spiritual perfection, but I did not want to get into that, because I am not here to preach.

6.

The Role of Philosophy in the Quest for Understanding

As to the question of what the role of philosophy is in this quest for understanding, it depends on what you mean by philosophy. Two and a half centuries of lack of use of words in the correct sense, which began really after Descartes and has lasted to our own time, created a need for "house-cleaning". This began with Wittgenstein and others in the Vienna Circle and has continued to our own day. They developed the school of Positivism and its kin movements, which have done a certain amount of house cleaning by getting terms defined and clarified. This you need; before the New Year the Persians clean house! But if they only do that and nothing else, they have not really celebrated the New Year! They have accomplished half the task, but the other task remains. I think Wittgenstein realized that; he always tried to write about what cannot be written about anyway, and there was a kind of contradiction in this.

I think, if you take philosophy as it is taught in most English and American universities today, whatever else it may be, has nothing to do with what I have said tonight in the sense of helping along that path to the center. But philosophy is not only that.



If by philosophy we mean what philosophy was up to Leibnitz in the West--he was the last to speak of the "perennial philosophy"--of course there is a great deal of relationship with what I have been saying. But essentially the practice or the discipline which is called philosophy as taught in most Western universities is not very similar to any of the pursuits which we have in mind, because it deals with precisely a projection of man upon a single plane, the plane of reason, with which he then tries to understand the root of his own existence. You have, therefore, not philosophy; you have philosophies; you have my philosophy and your philosophy and his philosophy; and in the West philosophy dies with the philosopher, whereas there is nothing more absurd in any Oriental language than, for example, the title of the famous book of Benedetto Croce, My Philosophy. This would sound so funny in Persian or Arabic or Sanskrit or, I am sure, in Chinese, precisely because philosophy is not meant to be "mine" and "thine" and "his" and "hers": it is meant to be a vision of the truth which transcends the individual and which the individual captures to the extent that he is a prism for the light and is not opaque like a dead stone on the pavement.

7.

The Redefinition of Science

And finally we come to the question of how I would define science. Of course, this is a vast question. I failed to distinguish two usages which I made of "science" in my paper. Unfortunately you do not have a term in English corresponding either to Wissenschaft of German, or even science in French--we use the term science de logic, science moral, and things like this--, certainly not the



Latin scientia or the Arabic Al'ilm. The lack of such a term is, of course, a very great disadvantage; you have to go around it sometimes, and I think the best thing to do is to recreate the meaning of "science" in English. There is no reason why the possibilities of a language cannot be brought back to life as long as that language is alive. And, in fact, I think that English offers the possibility of a revival of the metaphysical language within itself, provided one makes use of all the possibilities of this extremely rich language, which has both a Germanic and a Latin heritage from French and German and Anglo-Saxon languages. And I think the word "science" can gradually step by step be used in English again in the sense that it is used in more technical scholarly circles: for example, the famous book of al-Ghazālī, which has been translated in part into English and speaks of a revival or the revivification of the "sciences of religion (Ihyā' al-'u'ūm). What is meant by "science" in this sense is the middle of the universe, but suddenly the Renaissance man appeared, and he destroyed this anthropocentric world." Actually, it is just the other way around! The center at which Medieval man placed himself was also the lowest point in the scale of things; that is, man always considered himself with a humility that he felt he should have at the lowest point of universal existence. But what happened is precisely anthropomorphism, which comes about during the Renaissance, in which man became "the measure of all things". Now this phrase, "man is the measure of all things", which you also have in Greek philosophy, must not be mistaken in its traditional context with what it meant in the Renaissance. Some people have alluded to the famous Arabic sentence, "Man is the key to universal existence" by saying that this is just what is in Islam.



That is not so at all! Either in its Greek sense or in Islamic philosophy, neither the word insan nor the word anthropos itself is ever understood in a purely human sense--and here again you are stuck in English; in Arabic there are two terms for man, al-'insān and al-bashār, in which the humanism places man as a terrestrial being at the center of things; but man, considered as the image of God, if placed at the center of things, would result in a very different humanism from what we have.

But the humanism I attacked is a system in which man and his powers, mental, psychic, and otherwise, cut off from anything that transcends him, is placed as the ultimate criterion for all things, and in this sense every manifestation of Western civilization since the Renaissance is very profoundly anthropomorphic. And in fact, the reason the Far Eastern traditions appeal so much to many of the people in the West today, the idea of the void, of the nihil, the shunyā (emptiness), the shunyāta, is precisely because it is the very antithesis of what they feel their whole intellectual tradition has been since the Renaissance. I mean religion, for example, has expressed itself in more and more anthropomorphic terms: Christ gradually became a very nice looking man walking in Florence; the Virgin Mary's face became a very beautiful (the expression was angelic, to be sure, but) purely human face; the same is true in the paintings of Raphael. Gradually, then, religion became more and more anthropomorphic, and science, which was supposed to be the antithesis, was also extremely anthropomorphic in the sense that it made human reason the ultimate criterion of knowledge, even if it be the knowledge of the galaxies. Let's not forget who is the knower of the galaxies:



we talk about these billions of light years and such things, but there we are sitting in a little room at M.I.T. thinking about it, so it is our mind again that contains all this knowledge.

So this type of anthropomorphism is what I was talking about when I speak of Renaissance humanism; that is placing man in this sense at the center of things. And to this is opposed in a violent way something like Zen or Taoism or Islamic metaphysics, in which the non-human is made to be so paramount that it is "organized knowledge".

In any case I used "science" at the beginning of my paper as it is currently understood at M.I.T., and then I used the words scientia sacra and "organized knowledge" to try to give that sacred sense back to "science", which I believe will happen anyway, because in English there is no other choice.

8.

The Definition of Good and Bad Humanism

Professor Sivin mentioned quite rightly the fact that I used "humanism" in a technical sense. "Humanism" as the love of man is certainly not what I attacked. Rather I attacked a concept of "humanism" which is essentially anthropocentric to the "nth" degree; that is to place man at the center of things. One mistake that we oftentimes make in the study of the history of science is that we always say, "Oh, how terrible Medieval man was to consider himself to be the center of all things!" Actually, he placed himself in such a position as to be the very antidote to this way of seeing things. And you see this best of all in Chinese paintings in which nine-tenths is nothing, and of the other one tenth, four-fifths of



that are trees and mountains, and the little man walks on the bridge below. And this is exactly the negation of that arrogant Renaissance humanism of which I spoke. So you do have a Chinese humanism; you have an Islamic humanism, and Indian humanism; and that is a humanism in which man is always seen as being related not only to a cosmic but to a meta-cosmic order which transcends him.



IV

OPEN DISCUSSION

A

Scientists' Responsibility for What They Do:

No Universal Rules

QUESTION: Do you think scientists and engineers are responsible for the moral consequences of their innovations and inventions? And a sensitive student, should he search for the truth or for truth which is for the good of man?

NASR: The dilemma, which I think you pose, and which faces students today in the field of the sciences or engineering is that the discoveries he makes if he is a scientist, or the things he makes if he is an engineer, can oftentimes be used by forces outside of his power for ends which are to him unethical, to put it mildly, or sometimes out-and-out evil; and should the student disregard this and say, "My quest is for the truth", or should he be aware of the consequences of what he does?

Now this, of course, is a very profound moral problem which was discussed on this very campus two decades ago by Robert Oppenheimer who was burned by this fire himself. I do not think that, in the context of present Western civilization in which there is no general concensus about such dilemmas, this can have any solution which can apply generally to all people, and that it is a problem which each individual should think out for himself.

B

Science and the Contemplative Life

NASR: Let me at least throw out some ideas which are pertinent to



the decision which each person must make individually. First of all, the pursuit for truth is always a form of charity. And truth and what is good for man are not contradictory. One of the great tragedies which has occurred again in the modern world is the destruction of the contemplative life, the winning of the way of Martha over Mary, to such an extent that the contemplative life is debunked and opposed by the general value system of society. But the contemplative instinct cannot be destroyed in man, so there was, for example, a traditional Christian way accommodating this need for the contemplative life in monasteries and the like, but this gradually became diminished or else completely destroyed. A lot of those with this instinct took refuge in science. In the history of science Toynbee and Butterfield have shown that the Hundred Years War between France and England drove a large number of people who were horrified by politics and who wanted a contemplative life into Oxford and Cambridge to do science. So even historically science and contemplative life are related! But especially in our own day a lot of people who go into the sciences are people who, without knowing it, have a certain contemplative bent which is not satisfied in the normal way that it would be satisfied if they were born in Burma or in Tibet before 1959 or in France in the year 1400. And so, whether you like it or not, a good number of people who go into the field of the pure sciences (much more than into the field of the social sciences which in this sense are more like engineering; that is, they are interested in action) have this contemplative bent, and it is not accidental that they like quiet and like solitude; they can sit down for hours and think about a problem; their taste in art is oftentimes related to the product of the contemplative



life: they like the Gregorian chant and Medieval ikons and such things which themselves are the product of a contemplative state of being.

Now the person in whom this element is strong cannot actually rebel against it. I think of the famous advice to Rabbi Ben Ezra which Browning quotes: "Above all, to thine own self be true", is a very important idea; that is, a person in whom there is this bent should not cease to be a good physicist, say, because people are starving in India. This is a false argument. And certainly if he can think and if he finds his vocation to seek the truth, he should do it, because the search for the truth is the most important thing. In fact, the unfortunate thing in the modern world is that very few people are involved in the search for truth.

Now, it is the divorce between the truth and goodness and beauty that has brought us this devastation. What we usually consider to be the good is no longer beautiful, and the truth is always considered to be related to ugliness, and so forth.

C

Different Temperaments Respond Differently  
to the Use of Science and Technology for Evil

NASR: There is no doubt that modern science and especially technology, which oftentimes results from science, even if you don't think about it, can be used for evil. I mean you can be working on the purest field of theoretical physics, and thirty years later that results in building a lazer which will cut a tank in half or burn down a whole forest. Now this brings with it a tremendous responsibility. I think the make-up of people is different as far as this is concerned, and I do not think you can give blanket advice to



everyone. A person who has a specially strong sense of responsibility towards his actions, whatever he does, will, of course, be in a state of duress and difficulty over working on things and in discovering things or in letting loose certain forces which may be used against the very principles or very goals which he defends. But others, who find a kind of security in the larger society to which they belong, leave the responsibility for their actions to the larger public conscience; there are many people like that. And their reaction is very different.

I would conclude that all together this very difficult problem is fortunately coming much more to the fore, and the reason why a good number of people in the West today, in the last decade or so, are turning to the study of other fields than that of the pure sciences is precisely because of their concern with the problems which the aftermath of science brings about. But I do not think that right now with the present state of the Western world there is anything to do but to weigh on each particular level the pros and cons of the type of research one does, the type of action one does, and the type of person one is.

D

To Stop Doing What You Do Well Is No Answer, The Human  
Need for Truth and Beauty Is as Great as the Need for Food

NASR: Certainly I do not think, however, that one is doing any great service to humanity by stopping to do what one can do well. If you are a great musician and can play the harpsichord, and you say, "But this does not feed the hungry stomachs in Hoboken, New Jersey," or some place like this, I think you need to understand the real needs of man: the needs of man for beauty and for truth are no less



than for food! And I think that the impoverishment of man that we face today is precisely because both the truth and especially beauty have been considered far too long as luxuries. And they are not; they are as important as the air we breathe, and when we put them aside, we cannot breathe the air any more--it is too polluted to breathe! They are causally related! And I think, therefore, each person should consider what his action should be and try to examine his own conscience, until the time comes, God willing, when a more general consensus on principles of action comes into being in the West, and I do not see that in the very near future.

E

#### Islam's Image of Man

QUESTION: Could you please explain Islam's image of man?

NASR: All that I have said tonight has a great deal to do with the Islamic image of man. I think the Islamic image of man hinges on two concepts. The first is the idea that "God created man upon his image" (again not in an anthropomorphic sense), so the term "image" has a meaning which emerges from its theological context. The Infinite only has one face, which is faced towards the cosmos, and that is precisely our face. That is, the face that God turns towards man and the face that man turns towards God are the same thing! And that is why man cannot destroy the face of God without destroying his own face. (I have a chapter on this in a book coming out in Penguin called The Sword of Gnosis.)

And the second idea is the idea of man having the khalīfa, the role of vice-gerency upon the earth, the role of regent representative of God upon earth; but this is the case only in his function as



being ʿabd-Allāh, his being essentially in submission to God. In Islamic terms you can say that what modern man has done is to play the role of khalīfa without the meaning of ʿabd-Allāh, and that is precisely what he cannot do!

F

Criticism of Nasr's Views: His Religion Sounds Like Opium; the Social Aspects of Islam Are a Part of Its Mysticism; the People Not the Elite Determine What Happens

COMMENT (Iranian graduate student): This program tonight, planned as an academic lecture and discussion, also has tremendous political and social force. As the khalīfa is important, so is the gehalf very important. There is, in the Marxian philosophy, the idea of religion being the opium, and this stares us in the face all the time. And I am sure you did not mean it, but somebody listening to you without knowing you as I have the pleasure of knowing you, would think that you were giving us more and more opium! You have been talking about this one side which is very important but which cannot be achieved until the stomachs in India are fed! You cannot expect people to live "not by bread alone" unless they have the bread first, and this is not a different subject from what you have been talking about; the social aspect of Islam is part of its mysticism! You know that much better than I do. Your attempt to make the contrast between traditional and modern societies so big reminded me that for a long time the idea of man being possessed was not something that was taken symbolically, but was taken in its most literal sense until modern psychology came and said, "No, this is not true. This man has a mental disturbance." The question, and I think this is the crux of the matter, is not so much to die and be reborn, because I



am not sure that that is what Islam teaches, but rather, as Islam has always done, to integrate the new into the form of the continuing, old and youthful, rather than to try to make a break with modern achievements, whatever they may be, and then try to be reborn; because these facts are staring us in the face again: that the problem of the East is food, and the West, whatever its problems, is infinitely more advanced and is exploiting us! So you cannot just talk about high ideas without looking at their social implications.

Then, finally, I am not very happy with the elite idea that you have voiced more than once tonight. It is really from the three billion people in the world that we learn more than from the elites in the universities. It is the piety of the pious, of the work group, the assembly line, that in the end determines what we do rather than whatever you and I write.

G

World Religions Create a World and a Humanity; Today the Real Problem Is the Aggressiveness of the Affluent Whom the Rest of the World Tries to Emulate

NASR: First of all, the famous edict of Karl Marx that "religion is the opium of the people" has been changed in our time to, "Opium is the religion of the people!" (Laughter)

Secondly, I would be the last to deny the social aspect of Islam, in fact, of any religion. Religion is always a world order, and the difference between a world religion and a mystical cult, like that of the Essenes or the Orphic Cults and the like, is precisely that the religion always creates a world, a humanity, within which certain norms are prevalent and rule, even cosmically. So I certainly would be the last to negate its importance.



Third, I do not think that the "empty stomachs have not faith" motto holds, because I know in Iran all the people whose stomachs are empty fast; as soon as they become full, they do not fast any more! I am speaking from Persian experience, and maybe I am being too extreme in this. But by and large the problem is not that at all; the problem is not an either/or. There is no doubt that you have to feed mouths in any way that you can. There is also no doubt that there are more people hungry today than there were in 1800 because there are four billion people on the surface of the earth; and that is caused by the breakdown of the ecological equilibrium between man and the other species on the surface of the earth, and that if you allowed the alligators in Africa to keep their young for one year, they would eat up all of Africa. These are biological matters you cannot deny. There is no doubt about these matters. The problem today is that the existence of man is being threatened not only by the hungry--that is not the major problem--but by the people who are not hungry; that is, by an aggressive form of existence on certain parts of the planet that other parts are also trying to emulate and by the destruction of an equilibrium which precisely this aggressive form of existence has brought into being.

H

Suffering Is Inevitable;

The Real Need of Man Is for Meaning in Life

NASR: Fourthly, there are certain forms of suffering which are inevitable on the surface of the earth, and the idea we have--from the late President Johnson or from anybody else--to create a Great Society in which there is no suffering is the worst type of illusion of what human life is all about.



Man cannot create anything from nothing; even the M.I.T. cyclotron cannot create something out of nothing! They can only shift energy states and things like that; it is easy. They cannot actually remove a certain amount of imperfection that is in the world. The important thing is to reduce this to a minimum. Which society has done this or tried to achieve it? Every society has a certain form of evil. There is no doubt that women's feet were shrunk in medieval China, other people were hung on rocks; people today have car accidents; some people die of malnutrition; others die of syphilis. There are all sorts of accidents in different human societies; there are all sorts of evil: some are psychological--ten percent of the people in Sweden are in mental hospitals; in Burma ten percent may be there because of dysentery. I am not debating the fact that you have major forms of misery in nonindustrialized societies, but you also have major forms of misery in industrialized societies. The problem is to find out, What is the end or meaning of human life, and create a society in which meaning is preserved. It is much better to live a short life with meaning than a long life without it.

I

Criticism of Nasr's Intellectual and Spiritual

Elitism and Deprecation of Politics

COMMENT: You are just talking platitudes, and you are making me angry! You remind me of some of the Indians whom I met in India who sit up on the Planning Commission and think that they can postulate reality by virtue of economic indices. In your case, you think you can postulate reality by spiritual indices. And that, particularly your spiritual elitism argument, does not relate to anything that I know of. Elitism was rampant throughout your presentation!



In the first place, the idea that social change happens because ideas percolate down from the elite is just contrary to history. And you contradicted yourself by saying that fifty years ago people wrote books that nobody read, and now they read them not because they think they are right but because the social process has brought about the realization that the ideas were relevant. It was not the ideas that brought about the change!

NASR: Social change is not brought about by ideas alone. I did not say that it was.

COMMENT: Well, you have expressed a very elitist attitude towards history and a very condescending and deprecatory attitude towards politics. I think that is what we are really trying to talk about: your attitude towards politics as merely kind of the adiaphora of social life. What about the integration of mysticism and politics, the role of the prophet, the role of Ghandi in India? You have talked about these two modes of being as completely separate!

NASR: I did not talk about politics at all.

COMMENT: In your lecture you deprecated the political question.

J

Another Understanding of "Elite"; Nasr Uses It That Way

SIVIN: If I may interject something here, I think from what I know of Sufism that the way Nasr used the word "elite" is not the way we here usually think of it. There are two ways to think of an elite: one is a group of people like us who are privileged to live well, and sit here and talk politely. That is not what is being talked about here. When I talked about people who I thought provided clues in



looking for symbols that were so universal that we could all share them to find out what we all have in common, I was thinking of many people who died in prison! Or if they were Russians, in insane asylums! But that is not exactly the point.

What I said earlier implied that a traditional society is one in which the question of religious belief is irrelevant, where it is absurd to ask whether someone believes. Because what we tend to think of as a religion is actually a system of understandings of reality by which people understand their relation to the cosmos and whatever other orders of reality they apprehend.

It seems to me that at the point where punishment for non-belief becomes an option inside society, then religion as a theocracy, as a system that is in some way combined with politics has become corrupt. At that point, which we reached a long time ago, there are only a couple of different kinds of possibilities available for individual illumination, transcendence, living as a human being, or whatever you want to call it: one is trying to find your way as an individual; another is the formation of esoteric orders which keep what unity they can within a society that does not honor them, or only honors them so long as they do not interfere in politics! So, I think we understand Sufism better if we look at its history in Islam and see that it was an elite group in that sense, and it was that precisely because it was persecuted.

K

The Real Problem Is That Dr. Nasr Is Both a Sincere Muslim and  
Chancellor of a University. That is Why He Cannot

Escape the Relation of Religion and Politics

COMMENT (~~Iranian graduate student~~): That is the problem. S̄ufism was



not really as elite as all that. And I would accept what Dr. Nasr is saying very much more from him if he were not also chancellor of a university. He is not divorced really from the reality of the social life and political life of Iran. This is the problem. He is working for interests that make demands on him, very real demands! And therefore even a lecture like this has to have a stronger relation to the reality that exists in the world.

L

The Spiritual Elite in Traditional Societies

Can Exert an Influence Not Possible in the West

NASR: Maybe I can clear up one thing. The term "elite" as I used it has nothing to do with all the uses of the word "elite" by writers of political science in the United States. "Elite" as I have been using it actually is a translation of the word bravors. In fact, in the modern world there is no elite (of the kind I mean) to speak of anyway. Otherwise there would be no problem, you might say. There are, of course, a few people who are members of the elite dispersed here and there. But the kind of elite represented by Ghandi and others were able to act in a society precisely because of the nexus that still existed, as Professor Sivin said, between a society in which this type of experience still had some meaning and its leaders. Whereas even the most famous disciple of Ghandi, Nehru, and his daughter had to turn against Ghandi's most important teachings, which were anti-machine and anti-industrialization, precisely because even in one generation, they were dealing with another type of society.



Now, in actual practice the very concrete thing about which you speak, namely the relation of mysticism and politics, works out in the Arab world, say a country like Persia--I will not talk now about India or Pakistan--the person who has been able to achieve a certain amount of spiritual integration inwardly--he may be a ditch digger or a minister, it makes no difference; and here we should study the history of Sūfism more closely--is able to exercise an influence upon the social structure in ways which are not imaginable to us who study Middle Eastern society, or Pakistanian or Indian society, theoretically here in Cambridge.

Now, what one can do in the West is today very different from what you can do in a society in the East, which still has a certain number of traditional colors in it, although it is not completely traditional. Supposing in Cambridge, now, you become an accomplished saint, a great spiritual master, you could not really influence American politics. The best you could do is assemble a number of people whom you will discipline and train, who gradually will be able to train others, until you gradually create a society about yourself and at best then try to exercise some influence. And in a world like this, you have no other choice, because you cannot go to the electorate of 200 million people and say, "All right, now let us choose a spiritual principle", because the population is always on the receiving end of information which is given to them by a smaller group of people, and they received theirs from a smaller group of people, and finally it comes down to ten thousand people in a society of 200 million who, each in his own field, whether it is in literature or science or politics or economics or the like, is essentially the maker of thought. A person like Galbraith, for example, comes up with a particular



economic theory which gradually ...

QUESTION: How much has he changed?

NASR: Well, gradually his ideas percolate down to other people.

M

The Instance of Martin Luther King in the United States:  
a Sympathetic Moral Vibration, Not the Founder of a New World View

COMMENT: It seems to me that the dichotomy that you have drawn between the two cultures, our own Iranian culture, and the Eastern cultures in general, and the West, and the kind of presumption that the West is devoid of this infrastructure of morality ...

NASR: Not morality. I did not say that; I said mysticism.

COMMENT: All right, mysticism. It trickles down to the same thing as morality! In any case, given the dichotomy you have drawn, I wonder how you would explain the profound impact that a leader like Dr. Martin Luther King had in this country, which was quite different from the kind Mr. Galbraith has had but very similar to the influence that Ghandi had in his own society, and it is not coincidence that Ghandi was one of his teachers.

NASR: I think it can be explained by the fact that in American society all morality is certainly not dead.

COMMENT: You said, I think, that it was relatively unfeasible to exert this sort of leadership in the United States.

NASR: No. Let me explain what I mean. Morality is very different from the mysticism I have been talking about.



You see, Protestant ethics, which came over to America in the seventeenth century at its very beginning and which created a whole ethical fibre in American society, certainly is not totally dead. And I think that if morality were completely dead, the society would not survive. The fact that we do still have an American society is shown by the fact that we can go out and not be killed in the street, because no police force no matter how large could keep order otherwise. This means that there is still a moral fibre present, and occasionally there are men who appear, like a sympathetic vibration to that moral structure, and Martin Luther King was one of the people who did that, and I am not suggesting that that sort of thing could not occur again, but what I am saying is that a person like Martin Luther King cannot succeed in changing the world view of Western civilization about man. He can bring about a certain amount of political action, but I think today the gradual change in the world view of young people about things has come about through individuals, whether it be Alan Watts on one side or Hesse on the other side. Gradually individuals began to write, and people became interested in Nicolanda or some Swami in New York. Suzuki began to write about Zen, and so on. Of course, there is also the corresponding social need, as was pointed out, because there is always the give-and-take between need and those who meet the need. And there is always the question of which comes first, the chicken or the egg. But there is no doubt, if you study the causal nexus, that if Suzuki had not spoken about Zen twenty-five years ago in Cambridge, nobody would have known about Zen in Cambridge at that time. And so gradually through these people this change came about. And today a large number of people, because of the interest they feel within



themselves, seek various types of teaching; that it, the teachings, which always emanate from persons who are here or in India or somewhere else, influence these people. So a leader like Martin Luther King should not be confused with a change in world view, which I think in all civilizations, always come with a person or a group of people who are the founders of a new order, like the monastic orders of medieval Christendom; various prophets themselves have founded new religious orders in the world.

N

The Contradiction in Nasr: Sufi and University Chancellor

COMMENT: Your (Nasr's) philosophy tries to take an idea and force it over the material conditions, and the idea itself is detached from the social and economic conditions. I think this is where you are wrong in your philosophy. This is the type of idealism that has been discussed among philosophers for centuries. What is interesting to me is to see the contradictory nature of your logic: sometimes you take a formal logic, the Aristotelian logic of asking, "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" It is just dead; it cannot move! You cannot see that they both can develop out of the same thing, that they could evolve. And then you take the Hegelian logic and base your argument on that example (or model).

And I would like to comment as a part of this idea (which I think is formed through social and political conditions and not the other way around as you have claimed it is) that this idea is already material within yourself. You tried to make a dichotomy between political and economic and social aspects of life and your philosophy. It does not matter whether you say you do not want to do this or not,



but you are doing it, and I think it is very obvious in this group. This is nothing more than what is reflected in society in Iran! The repression which exists there has forced you to abandon the political ideas that you may have, and you are not able to speak against the repression! It is not only you; present Persian art has gone to the most abstract form, the form that cannot be realized other than by being an artist. So it is so detached from the society that it is only among an elitist group. The same is true of your philosophy!

COMMENT: This is a comment from another humble student of philosophy. First, I agree with Professor Nasr's basic view regarding man and his position in the universe. At the same time I have witnessed a reaction here to a contradiction which he himself is. He does not see that, and I am not saying that basically in a higher realm that contradiction exists; to put it in an Islamic phrase, "In the al-ʿālam al-rūhānī there is no contradiction"; there is no tadād; and obviously he has a connection with that, and I fully appreciate that. But others here see contradictions, and therefore I fear that the basic truths that you express will not be heard to be as important as they might be if you somehow convinced the audience that there is no contradiction in you. I am convinced that there is no contradiction in you. Perhaps you are convinced that there is no contradiction in you, but there are a lot of people here that see contradictions; for some of us your being a chancellor and a Sufi is a contradiction, for both are ways of life, and they seem to us to be incompatible.



The Unhistorical Bias of Nasr's Philosophy

COMMENT: I do not want to sound unappreciative of the general sacramental view of reality that you (Nasr) espouse, because there I agree with you very much. I do think, however, that in your philosophy of man you are being profoundly anti-historical in seeing human nature as a constant around which, or in relation to which, historical forms are ephemeral, immaterial, and of transitory importance. So that one thing remains, human nature. And history?

Well, history just goes on changing from one form to another, and we do not ever have to ask seriously, How is human nature manifested through change? Cannot human nature be a constant kind of change, or seen in less static terms than I think you see it?

I think this philosophy allows you to disregard historical questions which other people here tonight are concerned about, and also allows you to have an elitist (in the sense you were using it) view of the percolation down of ideas and changes of the philosophy of man. It allows you also to divorce, I think more than the classical Western position would allow, the active and the contemplative life. It also allows you to misunderstand, if I may say so, Renaissance humanism. I do not think you could cite a single Renaissance thinker who agrees with you. Your Renaissance humanism is an early nineteenth century romanticist view and is just historically unfounded, I would say. But the summation of my whole point--and I felt the anguish of the very excited speaker just before the last one-- is that to bring your philosophy up in relation to the ecological crisis seems to me to be an abnegation of historical responsibility of the very first order!



The views of history that you are talking about originate in relatively static societies, traditionalist societies. Referring to those philosophies as a way for the West to get out of its historical problems, I think, is pursuing an unrealistic response to those problems.

P

Will a Change of Consciousness Influence the Ecological Crisis?

QUESTION: Finally, one question: How can this change in the philosophy of man, which you want to see take place, be in any way influential on our ecological crisis?

NASR: Well, what has brought about the ecological crisis--among many other and extremely complex factors--is a kind of "free-for-all" feeling which Western man has felt vis-a-vis the natural environment; that is, there is nothing sacred about nature, therefore, nature is to be plowed, plundered, and made use of to the maximum extent possible: what I call the "prostitution of nature", rather than a marital relation between the two. And if the traditional view of man were revived, he would realize that in some sense by plundering nature he is plundering himself. It is this understanding which can be brought about, I think.

QUESTION: Do you think the change of consciousness will lead to the change in ecology's status?

NASR: Yes.

COMMENT: And there are others here who think that if anything will change our consciousness, it will be the deepening of our ecological crisis.



It will work in precisely the opposite way, but in any case, we do not have time to wait for our philosophy of man to change.

NASR: You are quite right.

COMMENT: So what you are telling us is that you have no response to this crisis?

NASR: No! You speak the truth, and he who wants to listen will listen, and he who will not listen will not listen. I have no other choice, because I am not running the world. My responsibility as one human being among four billion on the face of the earth is precisely to speak the truth. The Latin, "Vincit omnia veritas": "You must speak the truth and it will finally conquer", is the only choice we have. Everything else is beyond our hands.

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Nasr's Answer to the Contradiction in Himself

NASR: In conclusion, let me say that the many comments tonight, often made with emotion and interest show precisely that everyone here is excited and interested in the problems posed. This is a very good sign. The fact that people are not apathetic about discussing who man is means that there is already a difference of view from a few years back.

The point about the contradiction in myself personally which is felt here, especially among the Muslims, Persian and Arab, can be answered by something which I have oftentimes said to people who come to me from the West and want to follow tradition. They ask, "How do we do this right and that right when we are living in Boston or in Cambridge or in New York? How do we make our ablutions?"



What do you do with this and what do we do about that?" A series of about forty-five questions. And as soon as they begin to practice, in the first three days all these questions disappear; they find out that they were really asking questions which were non-existent. I think if anyone has understood anything about Sūfism or any spiritual discipline, he will know that the contemplative life is integrated into any kind of active life which the hands of destiny have placed before him. If you just read about Sūfism through books of 'Attār and Rūmī, of course, you will want to go into a little room and contemplate. But I would cite a saying by a very great contemporary Sufi of North Africa who said, "The situation of our world is such that it is no longer I who leave the world; it is the world that has left me." The situation of our times does not present the possibility, especially in the Islamic world in which there are no monastic orders, for a person to follow the contemplative life by running away from the situation in which the hands of destiny in history have placed him. The thing to do is to be able to integrate yourself wherever you happen to be. I might have been a potter; somebody else might come here tomorrow to give a lecture and have been a general in the army. But the point is that as long as the shariat is not broken, as long as somebody does not break the injunctions of the shariat, whatever he does outwardly for a profession has nothing to do whatsoever with what he can realize inwardly, because what he realizes inwardly, depends actually upon his state of being, whatever he may be doing externally.

But these are things which are not possible to discuss ex cathedra with a big audience like this. Secondly, they have very little to do with the subject which was at hand tonight, but the



fact that this question was brought up proves in fact what the people who raised it claimed; that in the contemporary world today among the most intelligent of audiences, people only want to hear things from people who practice what they preach! I think that is a very good sign.



APPENDIX

(This statement was received by the Technology and Culture Seminar from some of those who participated in the Seminar with Nasr.)

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There is political repression in Iran. The Iranian student population is everywhere persecuted for voicing its legitimate views towards reform.

Dr. Nasr, a high ranking academic personality, gave full credibility to this suffocating situation by endorsing an elitist ideology and preaching a "spiritual" philosophy which is vulnerable to being used for fascist purposes because it refuses to accept political responsibility. In this sense Nasr's religious position is essentially un-Islamic.

He proclaims himself to be a sufi.

The public strongly reacted to this fragmented image of a man who, as vice-chancellor of the state-governed Arya-Mehr University, occupies a political position proper. He denied the political aspect of his office, however, and when asked to comment on the current state of the universities in Iran, he refused to respond, saying: "I am here as a philosopher, not a politician."

Are there not university students in jail under false charges - their guilt never proven, their cases never tried?

Who is responsible for this injustice to the people of Iran?

Can a man be a spiritual philosopher, a bigot, an elitist, a sufi, and a university chancellor all at the same time? And still retain his integrity?

Is this the image of a man who has the true good of Iran at heart? we ask. Is he after his own good, or perchance after the good of something other?