

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal:** *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal*

Sherwood Park: Al-Qalam Publishing • Selanor: Islamic Book Trust  
2007, xii+12 pp., PB \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-9738744-2-6

Ever since modern science and technology made their first impact on the Islamic world about two centuries ago, posing increasing challenges to Muslim life and thought as the decades passed, Muslims have been debating among themselves how best to respond to these Western creations. This ongoing debate has produced several distinct 'philosophical positions' on Islam and modern science and technology, which compete against each other for influence and dominance in society. Because of the pervasive nature of the impact of modern science and technology on traditional Muslim life and thought, Muslim responses have covered and addressed a broad range of issues related to their implications from all dimensions.

One of the most well-known of these responses in the post-colonial period is the one articulated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. The philosophical position Nasr and his intellectual school have founded and articulated is well-known both in the Islamic world and in the West. It is not an exaggeration to say that, through his numerous writings and countless public lectures he has delivered throughout the world over the last five decades, Nasr has provided the most comprehensive intellectual response to modern science and technology that a Muslim scholar has ever presented in the entire history of the debate in question. Nasr's critique of modern science is profound and based on sound scholarship. He displays a deep knowledge of both the history and philosophy of modern western scientific thought and Islamic scientific tradition. He insists that Muslims should study and evaluate modern science from the perspective of Islamic tradition.

Nasr's clear philosophical position on modern science and technology

---

*Islam & Science*, Vol. 5 (Winter 2007) No. 2

© 2007 by the Center for Islam and Science  
ISSN 1703-7603 (Print); ISSN 1703-7602X (Online)

can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Modern science is not the *only* legitimate science of the natural order, but is simply a science of nature, legitimate only within the premises of its assumptions of the nature of both the known object and the thinking subject;
- (2) Islamic civilization cannot simply emulate Western science and technology without destroying itself; to those who know well both the religion of Islam and the nature of modern science, it is very clear that modern science is a direct challenge to the Islamic worldview;
- (3) Modern science and technology is not neutral or value-free; it imposes on humanity the worldview and the value system inherent in its operators.

Accordingly, Nasr argues, Muslims must confront modern science and technology with a deep sense of intellectual and moral responsibility and integrity in light of the Islamic intellectual tradition. He wants Muslims to master modern sciences and not to shun them. But, at the same time, he urges Muslims to come up with a positive Islamic critique of modern science on the basis of the Islamic intellectual tradition—a critique concerning both what it is and what it is not. As he sees it, it is the sacred duty of Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and scientists to create an authentic contemporary Islamic science.

Nasr has been consistent and steadfast in his critique of modern science and technology for the last fifty years. Writing from the perspective perennial philosophical tradition, his works expose numerous dimensions of what he strongly believes to be the destructive and dehumanizing aspects of modern science and technology. Many Muslims agree with his views, but there are also many who have criticized his alternative to modern science and technology—an authentic Islamic science—as being ‘backward looking’ and too impractical to be implemented in the contemporary world.

With this background, how should one react to *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal*? As someone who has been closely following Nasr’s writings on the subject, I must say that this is an interesting book for several reasons. Structurally divided into seven chapters arranged in three interrelated sections, the book explores the central theme of the relationship between Islam, science, Muslims, and technology. The sections appear to have been arranged in such a way as to invite readers to focus on the middle section, which contains four interview-style conversations between Nasr and Iqbal

originally published in the journal *Islam & Science* but which have been thoroughly revised for this publication. These conversations are preceded by the first two chapters of the book: the first, by Muzaffar Iqbal, another leading scholar of Islam and science, serves more or less as their historical context; the second, “The Cosmos as Subject of Scientific Study” by Nasr, serves as their metaphysical and cosmological context or framework. The conversations are followed by one chapter entitled “The Islamic Worldview and Modern Science,” which contains the text of Nasr’s keynote address delivered at an international conference on science in Islamic polity held at Islamabad in 1995, the occasion that had brought Nasr and Iqbal together for the first time.

In my view, this new book is of considerable significance to the contemporary Muslim discourse on Islam and science and technology in a number of respects, and should be welcomed accordingly by all interested in finding veritable solutions to problems which modern science and technology pose to the Islamic world. First, this book may be considered as the first in which Nasr’s all-embracing responses to modern science and technology in relation to Islam and Muslims have been presented in a single volume. It addresses the problems and dilemmas of contemporary Muslims in the field of science and technology in a more comprehensive and contemporary manner than any of his other writings on the subject.

Second, there is great value in the interview-styled conversations. Nasr’s previous writings have not dealt with all of the criticisms directed against his views concerning modern science and technology and his idea of Islamic science. Or, if he has, in some of the cases the response has been brief, emphasizing only principles which in the case of many people need further explanation. Through his well formulated questions, Iqbal has provided an excellent opportunity for Nasr to address in a more detailed manner questions and issues on the subject, both theoretical and practical, which are very much in the minds of many Muslims today.

Third, Nasr’s articles on the cosmos and the Islamic worldview help us to remind ourselves of the need to have an immutable and veritable philosophical context for our discourse on Islam, science, and technology. If Iqbal’s chapter on the “Context” has provided readers with a good background of the current diverse Muslim thinking on modern science and technology, including explicitly identified views critical of Nasr’s position such as those of Pakistan’s political and scientific elites (6-11) and Ziauddin Sardar (19-22), Nasr’s chapter on the cosmos and the Islamic worldview helps to not only differentiate his position from others, but also to give justification and meaning to whatever conversations Muslims want to have on the subject in question. This is because Nasr’s discussion of the cosmos and the Islamic worldview is explicitly based on the teachings of

the Qurʾān.

Iqbal's conversations with Nasr deal with a wide range of theoretical and practical issues under four broad headings: (i) Islam, science, and Muslims; (ii) Islam, Muslims, and modern technology; (iii) On the environmental crisis; and (iv) On biological origins. All of these general themes are of immense importance and their treatment is a matter of urgency, not only for Islamic life and thought and the global Muslim *Ummah* but also for humanity as a whole. Looking at the content of the conversations, with Nasr giving greater clarity to his intellectual position on modern science and technology than he has ever done before, I am inclined to think that this new book could very well inspire a new positive and fruitful debate among Muslims on the issues in question. Both Nasr and Iqbal are to be congratulated for making available this much needed book to Muslims everywhere, particularly the younger generation of Muslim scholars, scientists, and technologists.

*Osman Bakar*

*Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Science*

*University of Malaya and Professor of Islamic Thought*

*International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)*



**BRILL'S CLASSICS IN ISLAM: VOLUME 1**

**C. Snouck Hurgronje:** *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century*

Leiden • Boston: Brill 2007, xiv+355 pp., HC, Eur 69.00/ US\$ 90.00

ISBN 978-90-04-15449-3

The subtitles of this first volume in the newly launched "Brill's Classics in Islam" series are as important for understanding the content and nature of this book as its title: "Daily Life, Customs and Learning. The Moslems of the East-Indian Archipelago." More revealing, however, are the colorful details of the life of its author, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), variously known as an imposter, a Dutch spy, an opportunist of the worst kind who used the ambitions of a flagging Dutch colonizing empire for personal gains, and a respected Orientalist. Perhaps he was all of these at once. He was certainly one of the few Europeans who have actually resided in Makkah—the Sacred City of Islam forbidden to non-Muslims—prior to the twentieth century. His fortunes were aided by the times in which he lived, an era during which it was possible for any adventurous European