

BOOK REVIEW

A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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This book is an expository philosophical and intellectual 'map' for young Muslims who may find themselves mesmerized and confused by philosophical, intellectual, and practical aspects of modernity so they may orient their thought to provide their own answers to philosophical and intellectual challenges as a young person in the Modern World. It primarily aims at Muslim youths, presumably undergraduates who face the forces of modernity from their educational and social life. This book is relatively short compared to other Seyyed Hossein Nasr's works. It is only about 260 pages from cover-to-cover minus the Index section. In addition, this book is also for those who want to have an overview of Nasr's philosophical deliberation on challenges of modernity and its possible answers seen from an Islamic perspective. This book is arguably the simplest introduction to Nasr's thought because it is framed for the viewpoint of the young who is trying to find his or her ways in the Modern World. Thus breadth, clarity and simplicity in terms, topics, and examples can be seen throughout this book and not details, footnotes and nuances. The experience of reading it is akin to having a tour over a certain Islamic philosophical overview as a young person to explore the wealth of past Islamic philosophy and thought. The book aims to prepare the young Muslim minds to intellectually and philosophically respond to modern challenges first in their practical life and then cultivate a discipline of thought and commitment to learn so they could engage in intellectual discourses with regards to fundamental questions of philosophy – theology of *tawhid*, epistemology of *meaning*, and metaphysics of meta-reality in later life. This book is also an implicit preliminary exposition against meaninglessness due to exclusivist, positivistic, and empirical materialism that pins its fundamental axioms of knowledge in the domain of the material and observable universe.

I begin with a defence on why this book is still valid in 2021. This book is twenty-seven years old and thus, fairly outdated in terms of its specific examples. However, by no means is its basic premises and explanations suffer a similar fate. In fact, they should be reviewed to shed some light to current context, especially in Borneo and Southeast Asia. Thus, its practical content should be expanded and updated to present a context that fit our needs and explored by our thinkers and scholars – not necessarily by the author himself but those who are deeply persuaded by, or strongly objects to, ideas presented in this book. With the rise of other non-Western civilizations especially the Chinese who are now arguably occupying the driver's seat of modernity, a similar work of this kind needs to be (re)produced.

Regarding Nasr's 'Modern World' within context of this book, I interpret it as a term that houses a metaphysical quality of space and time of the present universe of narratives dominated by Modern thoughts, practices and products of Western discourse in contemporary history and philosophy as Nasr defines it. These include certain assumptions about lifestyles, beliefs, values, and individual and collective actions based on Modern thought typically associated with Western ideals of human development and goals of society. In this book, Nasr certainly did not detail the etymology and episteme of Modern and World that comprise the term. He just discussed the term to the extent that is sufficient for a young reader who are presumably new to metaphysical conception to rudimentarily distinguish between 'lived reality' and corpus of knowledge that

underpin *that* ‘fact of life’, in this case the Modern Life as generally related to the West. In short, Nasr attempts to tease the problem of underlying Modern corpus of knowledge that guide the unexamined life of youth so they may gain an awareness to assess such problem philosophically by reflecting on Islamic thought on *Sophia Perennis* (the Perennial Wisdom) within the discourse of modernity. With such awareness, young readers could address and later solve the ‘Modern problems’. Interestingly, Nasr does not seem to present the Modern problems as exclusively ‘Muslim problems’. Rather, he poses them in such a way that is universally inclusive so the fruits of such philosophical inquiry done within Islamic tradition could benefit humanity at large.

Now, the book itself comprises five sections: Introduction, Part I, II and III, and Index. The introduction outlines to whom this book is primarily for, intention of the author, and preliminary background setting why this book is written in specific time and space. Part I is entitled ‘The Message of Islam.’ This is basically a quick introduction to Islam without the scholarly burden of extensive Anglo-Arabic referencing, detailed discussions and specific terminologies that may deter a total beginner who are curious about Islam and those who may have very limited Arabic and limited English capacity to appreciate the book’s content. Yet, the chapter does not sacrifice essential details and basic propositions about Islam and Muslims in general. There are seven subsections in Part I namely: 1. Islam, the Noble Quran and hadith – Revelation and the Meaning of Religion; 2. God, Man and The Universe – Questions of Eschatology; 3. The Shari’ah; 4. Islamic Spirituality and Thought; 5. Islamic Science; 6. Literature and the Arts; 7. The Islamic World in Modern Times. Nasr’s introduction is special because it does not limit the study of ‘essential’ Islam into just the five pillars of Islam and the six pillars of Faith (Iman), the Qur’an, the Hadith, and the Shari’ah – not just the Islamic Law as understood in present legal system, but also as moral code and general principles of life. Instead, he elaborates those essentials into seven subsections aforementioned so a young reader could appreciate the breadth of Islam and its various colours that are also shaped by various communities and civilizations over time and places. This is the main and the largest part that takes almost half of the book.

Part II is entitled ‘The Nature of the Modern World’. In this part, Nasr outlines the fundamentals of what is meant by ‘Modern’ in its philosophical, intellectual, and civilizational context primarily attributed to a conception of ‘the West’. There are seven subsections in Part II namely: 8. Religion in the Modern West; 9. Modern Western Philosophy and Schools of Thought; 10. Modern Science and Technology; 11. Political, Social and Economic Life of the Modern World; 12. Modern Education – Its History, Theories and Philosophies; 13. Art in the Modern West and 14. The Modern Lifestyle. This is the second largest part in the book that is probably about forty percent of its content. This is where Nasr sets in detail how the ‘Modern World’ looks like – a presentation of intellectual and philosophical ‘map’ – in hope that the young readers would be able to ‘catch’ and thus, understand what is already happening in their lives if they lived in Western countries or non-Western urban and semi-urban settings.

Part III is the epilogue entitled ‘Responding to Modern Challenges’. This is the shortest part but no less in importance; it outlines a general strategy – practical, intellectual, and philosophical – to prepare a Young Muslim to *live, participate, and contribute* to society that they live in while responding at the same time major challenges posed by practical, intellectual, and philosophical consequences of modernity from a broad dimension about life of being a Muslim. This means generating fresh ideas and knowledge derived non-secular sources, scientific and beyond to address root causes of human problems who are experiencing ‘the Modern World’.

Of course, one does not have to be young or Muslim to benefit from this brilliant work. Nasr himself is a world-renowned scholar-philosopher whose work is highly respected both in Islamic and Western academia. Below I will outline some related works pertinent to issues raised in this

book which demand more attention to details to respective readers and scholars in their respective fields. In Sarawak, where issues of economic and human development are met with issues of environmental protection and sustainability, one may consider Nasr's view about human *being's* relationship with Nature in one of his seminal works *Man and Nature (M&N): the Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (republished in 2003, first published in 1976). M&N explores the relationship between Man and Nature as deliberated in major religions of the world such as Islam, Christianity, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. What is special in his outlook is that he views such relationship in Islamic Sufi dimension, which combines unique scientific-logic and outlook to problems of metaphysics and moral philosophy arisen from Man's (dis)connectedness with Nature. In M&N, as an extended reading to this book, provides a sequential conceptual maturation and further elaboration about 'Young Muslim' to then become 'Man' (of course, Woman) and further transcendence from 'the Modern World' to more encompassing 'Nature'. Within Borneo's context in Southeast Asia, the synthesis of such idea may further contribute to more philosophical inquiries about the fundamentals of human being available in vast yet equally under-explored philosophies and knowledge traditions of *local* Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and other spiritualistic dimensions that could inform both our worldviews and offer solutions to the current environmental concerns we are currently having – deforestation, loss of biodiversity, river pollution and the COVID-19 pandemic for instance.

For more comprehensive introduction to Nasr's philosophical thought, I recommend that this book is read together with William Chittick's *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (2007). In Chittick's book, readers will be exposed to an anthology of Nasr's most representative essays on Islam, Sufism, Tradition and the Environmental Crisis. This is basically a reader to Nasr's most important essays and is suitable for a must-have textbook for undergraduates in introductory and intermediate classes in philosophy, Islamic philosophy, religious, and humanistic sciences. It is also suitable for scholars and serious readers in general to acquire more details about Nasr's personal life and his trajectories of ideas as they develop throughout his long years of scholarship in philosophy of religion and related sciences.

For those who may want to delve deeper into Nasr's metaphysics, cosmology and *tawhidic* theology, they may consider his *Knowledge and the Sacred* (republished in 1989; first published in 1981). *Knowledge and the Sacred* outlines a comprehensive exposition of *Scientia Sacra*, the Sacred Science, which outlines the multidimensionality of the world and knowledge having orders and levels with particularistic and ultimate purpose(s), the source, centre, and end being the One, or God. *Knowledge and the Sacred* is again a detailed analysis of major religious traditions – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and analytical critique against modern philosophy, particularly reductionism and materialism. *Knowledge and the Sacred* is hugely important because it presents serious philosophical inquiry into Religious Wisdom without falling into the oversimplified essentialization of categorical meaning that can be probably summarized as religio-political identity politics in one hand, and positivist-empirical science on the other. *Knowledge and the Sacred* is an advanced read, drawn from a series Nasr' academic lectures on religion, science traditional and modern. *Knowledge and the Sacred* is a must read for all who may want to engage Nasr's thought in depth but may not be as accessible compared to the book currently reviewed. Nonetheless, one should aim to read *Knowledge and the Sacred* sooner and later due to its metaphysical depth and for its esthetical proses reminiscent to contemplating beautiful and spiritually engaging symbolic literature not usually associated with analytical academic works.

For contemporary academic works that inherits from Nasr's line of thought into Civilizational studies pertinent to Southeast Asia, one can read Osman Bakar's *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World: Thematic Essays* (2018). This book details some features of the sciences of

classical Islamic civilization with respect to specific role of Islam in Southeast Asia. Bakar's work is arguably the epistemological bridge between Western and Islamic civilizational science. It is an attempt to evaluate Southeast Asian society (Muslim society and religious and spiritually rooted society in general) when they lost their *tawhidic* epistemology while traversing the Modern World predominated by Western civilizational ideas and ideals. It also made a proposition for its recovery in the form of Civilizational Renewal. To date, this book is unique because it expands Nasr's conception of *tawhidic*-theology into practical civilizational *science* that can be pinned to Southeast Asian context with respect to Malay-Muslim (presumably Bruneian and Malaysian) worldview.

To conclude, this book is a call to philosophy in basic and simple terms for the young. It is also an exposition of a particular Islamic philosophy seen from an extensive and magisterial scholarship that attempts to reconnect the spiritual, the scientific, the Divine, the Human, the World and the Beyond so one can see that there is Sacredness in all these that restore their Meaning. This book is also an invitation to explore the Modern World beyond what is seemingly obvious and mundane – it is a critique and a proposition that a better World is possible to live and to inherit.

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