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Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Critique of Modernist and Orientalist Interpretive Approaches

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Abstract

In contemporary Qur'anic studies, modernist and orientalist approaches have become increasingly influential. These two approaches offer new frameworks for understanding the Qur'an but often separate the sacred text from its spiritual and metaphysical roots. The modernist perspective emphasizes reason, historical context, and linguistic analysis, while the orientalist view relies on philological and historical-critical methods developed within secular academic traditions. As a result, both tend to reduce the Qur'an to a cultural or historical artifact rather than preserving its role as divine revelation. This study aims to examine the critical perspective of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on these two interpretive trends and to explore the alternative hermeneutical framework he proposes. The research applies a qualitative method using literature review and textual analysis of Nasr's major writings. The findings reveal that Nasr strongly criticizes both approaches for neglecting the spiritual dimension of the Qur'an. He argues that understanding the Qur'an requires a return to sacred and traditional interpretation methods that emphasize inner spiritual meaning. Nasr promotes a hermeneutic approach that integrates reason, intuition, and spiritual insight, allowing for a more holistic understanding of revelation.

He also underscores the role of traditional scholars and spiritual authorities in maintaining the integrity of Qur'anic meaning. The study concludes that Nasr's alternative framework offers a meaningful response to the limitations of modernist and orientalist interpretations. By restoring the balance between textual analysis and spiritual depth, his approach contributes significantly to enriching Qur'anic hermeneutics. It encourages future scholarship to reengage with the sacred aspects of revelation in ways that are both intellectually rigorous and spiritually grounded.

Kata kunci: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Qur'anic Interpretation, Modernism, Orientalism, Sacred Hermeneutics

Abstrak

Dalam studi Al-Qur'an kontemporer, pendekatan modernis dan orientalis telah menjadi dua aliran yang semakin berpengaruh. Kedua pendekatan ini menawarkan kerangka baru dalam memahami Al-Qur'an, namun sering kali memisahkan teks suci dari akar spiritual dan metafisiknya. Perspektif modernis menekankan rasionalitas, konteks sejarah, dan analisis linguistik, sementara pendekatan orientalis bergantung pada metode filologis dan historis-kritis yang berkembang dalam tradisi akademik sekuler. Akibatnya, Al-Qur'an cenderung dipandang sebagai artefak budaya atau sejarah, bukan sebagai wahyu ilahi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pandangan kritis Seyyed Hossein Nasr terhadap kedua pendekatan tersebut, sekaligus mengeksplorasi kerangka hermeneutika alternatif yang ia tawarkan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif, melalui studi pustaka dan analisis teks terhadap karya-karya utama Nasr. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Nasr secara tegas mengkritik pendekatan modernis dan orientalis karena mengabaikan dimensi spiritual dalam memahami Al-Qur'an. Ia menekankan pentingnya kembali pada metode tafsir yang sakral dan tradisional, yang berfokus pada makna batin dan pengalaman spiritual. Pendekatan yang ia ajukan menggabungkan akal, intuisi, dan wawasan spiritual, serta menekankan peran ulama dan otoritas spiritual dalam menjaga kemurnian makna wahyu. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa kerangka alternatif yang ditawarkan Nasr menjadi respon bermakna terhadap keterbatasan penafsiran modernis dan orientalis. Dengan menyeimbangkan analisis teks dan kedalaman spiritual, pendekatan ini memberikan kontribusi penting bagi pengembangan hermeneutika Al-Qur'an, serta mendorong studi-studi masa depan untuk kembali mengaitkan pemahaman wahyu dengan dimensi kesakralan yang mendalam.

Kata kunci: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Tafsir Al-Qur'an, Modernisme, Orientalisme, Hermeneutika Sakral

Introduction

The development of Qur'anic studies in the modern era has given rise to a variety of interpretive approaches that reflect the intellectual dynamics of Muslims in responding to contemporary challenges. Among these, the modernist and orientalist approaches have emerged as two dominant trends shaping contemporary tafsir discourse. The modernist approach has been widely developed by Muslim thinkers who attempt to interpret the Qur'an by emphasizing rational, contextual, and historical aspects (Ayash et al., 2025). For instance, Muhammad Asad, in his translation of the Qur'an, highlights modernist discourse by selecting meanings and interpretations that

align with the modernist project (Chande, 2004). This approach is also evident in works that critique traditional and orientalist perspectives on Islam's core sources, emphasizing the importance of reason in understanding revelation (Drammeh, 2014).

Meanwhile, the orientalist approach often employs philological and historical-critical methods that treat the Qur'an as a cultural text that emerged within the context of 7th-century Arab society (Nasr, 2005; Nasr et al., 2015). These scholars attempt to link the Qur'an to Judeo-Christian teachings and argue that the revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad originated from those sources (Baker, 2020). Such approaches frequently aim to distort and cast doubt on the authenticity of the Qur'an as a source of Islamic legislation (Al-Ghool, 2024). Moreover, orientalists have utilized theories such as "canonization theory" to study the historical compilation of hadith literature, further demonstrating the significant influence of orientalist scholarship on the textual analysis of Islamic sources (Pulungan, 2023). Although both approaches have contributed to Islamic studies, they are often criticized for disregarding the spiritual, metaphysical, and sacred dimensions of revelation.

Within this context arises the central question: What are Seyyed Hossein Nasr's critiques of the modernist and orientalist approaches to interpreting the Qur'an? Nasr sharply criticizes both trends, which he views as representing a secular paradigm that reduces revelation to merely a linguistic or historical phenomenon. He argues that modern approaches have failed to grasp the Qur'an as a transcendent text that connects humanity with divine reality. He states, "the modern historical and philological approaches often operate upon the assumption that revelation is a purely human and historical phenomenon rather than a Divine reality" (Nasr, 2005).

This article aims to systematically explain Nasr's critique of modernist and orientalist interpretations of the Qur'an. It will also elaborate on the sacred epistemological framework (*scientia sacra*) that underpins his criticism. By analyzing Nasr's major works—such as *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), *The Need for a Sacred Science* (2005), and *The Study Quran* (2015)—this study will illustrate how Nasr offers an alternative hermeneutical approach rooted in spirituality and the metaphysical tradition of Islam.

This study is significant in reasserting the role of classical Islamic tradition within contemporary tafsir discourse. By exploring Nasr's critique, it provides a reflection on the secular tendencies in modern Qur'anic studies and proposes a holistic and sacred hermeneutic alternative. Nasr's thought enriches modern Qur'anic interpretation by integrating spirituality, symbolism, and intuition into interpretive

methodology, and contributes to addressing the crisis of meaning brought about by modernity (S. Nasr, 2012; S. H. Nasr, 1981; Safdar & Shams-Ur-rehman, 2021).

Theoretical Studies

Intellectual Background of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one of the most prominent contemporary Muslim intellectuals, known for integrating both Western and Eastern educational traditions in shaping his intellectual outlook. He completed his formal education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University, with academic backgrounds in physics and the history of science, before turning to Islamic philosophy and Sufism (Nasr & Michaud, 1976). Initially trained in physics as an undergraduate student, Nasr later shifted his focus to philosophy. He currently serves as a professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University (Hussain, 2023). His mastery of modern science enables him to critique Western epistemology from within, while simultaneously enriching his views on the interrelationship between knowledge, religion, and spirituality. Nasr's intellectual journey includes a profound engagement with traditional Islamic philosophy and science, particularly the concept of *scientia sacra* (sacred knowledge) (Widiyanto, 2017).

Nasr's intellectual project seeks to revitalize traditional knowledge as a counterpoint to the dominance of modern scientific paradigms (Widiyanto, 2017). His broad expertise allows him to act as a bridge between modern civilization and the classical Islamic tradition. One of the central pillars of Nasr's thought is the philosophy of Perennialism, which holds that all authentic religious traditions share a common metaphysical truth and originate from a single divine source (S. Nasr, 2012; S. H. Nasr, 1981). He was deeply influenced by the ideas of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. As a leading proponent of Perennialism, Nasr seeks to identify the metaphysical commonalities among the world's religious traditions. His works emphasize the importance of interfaith dialogue and the re-sacralization of nature (Robinson-Bertoni, 2017).

The influence of Perennialist philosophy and Sufism on Nasr's thought is substantial. He has significantly shaped scholarly appreciation for Perennialism and traditional Islam, including in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. His ideas are deeply rooted in the classical Islamic tradition of the medieval period, particularly the Illuminationist school (Ishraqi philosophy) developed by Suhrawardi (Widiyanto, 2016). In this context, Nasr strongly advocates for Sufism as a path to esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*), which he considers the essence of pure and universal Islamic

teaching (S. Nasr, 2012; S. H. Nasr, 1981). His engagement with Sufism is evident in various discussions on spirituality and the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* (the perfect human) (Hussain, 2023).

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Nasr positions himself as a defender of spiritual and intellectual orthodoxy. He is deeply critical of modernity—especially its manifestations in secularism, relativism, and the dominance of materialist approaches to knowledge. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential scholars in contemporary Islamic and religious studies. Nasr contrasts modernity with traditional Islamic perspectives, particularly in the context of science and environmental issues (Widiyanto, 2017). In works such as *Knowledge and the Sacred* and *The Need for a Sacred Science*, Nasr offers an epistemological reconstruction rooted in metaphysical principles and divine revelation (S. H. Nasr, 1981, 2005).

One of Nasr's primary critiques of modernity is his assertion that the global ecological crisis is a consequence of the modern Western worldview, which has desacralized both knowledge and nature (Safdar & Shams-Ur-rehman, 2021). He argues that humanity must return to a sacred understanding of the world in order to address this dual spiritual and ecological crisis (Robinson-Bertoni, 2017). Nasr's intellectual orientation can be seen as an Islamic response to Western modernity, one that also resonates with values of religious pluralism (Siddiqui, 2013). His critique calls for the re-sacralization of knowledge, nature, and all aspects of life, so that humanity may remain connected to the transcendent reality that should be at the center of existence (Hussain, 2023).

Modernist Interpretative Approaches in Qur'anic Studies

The modernist interpretative approach in Qur'anic studies emerged as a response to the challenges posed by modernity, colonialism, and the crisis of religious authority in the Muslim world. Modernist thinkers sought to reformulate Islamic teachings in ways that would align with contemporary developments while maintaining the core substance of the Qur'anic message. As a result, they developed a more contextual, rational, and inclusive approach that is open to ideas from beyond the traditional Islamic framework.

The key characteristics of the modernist approach can be summarized as follows. First, rationalism and contextualization—modernist interpreters emphasize the importance of reason and historical context in understanding revelation. Qur'anic interpretation is seen as incomplete without considering the socio-historical circumstances at the time of revelation (Ozdemir Kardas, 2023). Second, there is a

tendency to reject supernatural elements in the text—such as magic or miracles—which are often interpreted metaphorically or symbolically (Mol, 2013). Third, modernist scholars frequently draw from non-Islamic sources, including modern philosophy and social sciences, to broaden the horizons of tafsir (Mol, 2013). Fourth, there is an emphasis on contemporary values of justice and ethics, based on the belief that Qur’anic teachings can provide a moral foundation to address modern challenges (Akbar, 2021).

Several prominent figures represent this approach. Fazlur Rahman is known for his theory of the “double movement,” a two-directional hermeneutical method that bridges the historical context of revelation with its ethical application in the present. He was also critical of literalist readings of the Sunnah and proposed a thematic approach to understanding the Qur’an (Bektovic, 2016). Muhammad Abduh, a pioneer of Islamic modernism in Egypt, emphasized the role of reason and *ijtihad* in interpreting the text and called for a reform of religious thought to meet the needs of the modern age (Çoruh, 2020). In South Asia, Sayyid Ahmad Khan developed a rationalist interpretation of the Qur’an and sought to harmonize Islam with modern science (Hassan, 2014).

However, the modernist approach is not without criticism. One of the major critiques is its neglect of the classical tafsir tradition, which for centuries served as the main framework for understanding revelation (Searing, 2006). Additionally, the adoption of Western hermeneutical methods is considered problematic by some scholars, as these methods may conflict with Islamic epistemology and compromise the foundational principles of tafsir (al-Shafie, 2004). This approach is also accused of contributing to intellectual fragmentation within contemporary Islamic discourse due to its weak methodological consistency and lack of authoritative grounding. Moreover, modernist interpretations are often criticized for reducing the sacred nature of the Qur’an, treating it merely as a historical product relevant only to a specific period (Ayash et al., 2025).

Given these characteristics and challenges, the modernist approach remains a central point of debate in contemporary Qur’anic studies. It is within this context that Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s critique becomes particularly relevant and significant. Nasr firmly rejects the secular and historicist tendencies of the modernist paradigm and instead advocates for an interpretive framework grounded in sacred and transcendent knowledge.

Orientalist Interpretative Approaches in Qur’anic Studies

The orientalist interpretative approach in Qur’anic studies is generally characterized by the use of critical and historical analysis, focusing on the origins,

compilation, and thematic structure of the text. Orientalist scholars tend to view the Qur'an as a historical document that can be examined using scientific methodologies, similar to those applied in biblical studies. This approach encompasses historical and literary analysis, textual criticism, and debates surrounding thematic unity within the Qur'anic surahs. For instance, some orientalists question the thematic coherence of surahs due to their diverse content, although others argue that this diversity does not necessarily undermine the structural unity of the Qur'an's message (Al-Ghool, 2024).

Richard Bell was a key figure in the development of the literary approach to the Qur'an. He proposed hypotheses regarding the process of revelation and textual compilation, and established a chronology of verses based on content and linguistic style. Through this method, Bell aimed to demonstrate the logical connections between seemingly disjointed verses (Nejad, 2024). Meanwhile, John Wansbrough adopted a more radical position by applying *form criticism* and textual methods from biblical studies to Islamic texts. He questioned the traditional narratives concerning the origins of Islam and the Qur'an, and argued that the Qur'an is a product of a more complex theological construction than conventionally assumed (Grodzki, 2015; Koç, 2020).

Despite offering significant intellectual contributions, the orientalist approach to Qur'anic studies has often been criticized, particularly regarding its objectivity and ideological bias. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, critiques orientalist scholarship for constructing the Eastern world as "the Other" in stereotypical and demeaning ways. He asserts that such studies are deeply embedded in power relations and Western colonial interests (Saidin & Rashid, 2022). Additional criticism comes from Muslim scholars who argue that many orientalists engage in selective interpretation and overlook the socio-religious context of Qur'anic verses (Omran & Al-Shammari, 2025).

Criticism of orientalist approaches has prompted a reassessment of Western methodologies in Islamic studies. Many contemporary scholars call for a more balanced and unbiased approach—one that respects the integrity of the text and incorporates internal Islamic perspectives in the interpretation of the Qur'an. This debate has served as a catalyst for the development of a more inclusive and dialogical field of Qur'anic studies, engaging both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars (Macfie, 2019). Thus, despite its controversies, the orientalist approach remains an influential part of the evolving academic discourse in Qur'anic studies.

Epistemological Framework of Nasr's Critique

Seyyed Hossein Nasr constructs his epistemological framework on the foundation of *scientia sacra* (sacred knowledge), which he positions as the core of traditional civilization. He views *scientia sacra* not merely as a form of religious knowledge but as the central axis of a comprehensive knowledge system that integrates the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of life. In this regard, Nasr offers a profound critique of modern science, which he argues has been severed from its transcendent and spiritual foundations. Unlike some contemporary Muslim thinkers who promote the Islamization of modern knowledge, Nasr proposes an alternative approach rooted in the living and dynamic tradition of Islamic philosophy (Mughal et al., 2022; Widiyanto, 2017).

In his understanding of revelation, Nasr emphasizes that the Qur'an is a direct manifestation of the Divine Will, not a human construct or the result of historical fabrication. Consequently, his interpretive approach is deeply esoteric, prioritizing inner meaning and spiritual depth in engaging with the sacred text. In *The Study Quran*, Nasr and his contributors present a moderate yet profoundly Sufi-oriented exegesis, aiming to uncover spiritual meanings that remain relevant in the contemporary context (Riza, 2023). This reflects Nasr's commitment not only to preserving the traditional view of revelation as a divine act but also to revitalizing it within a modern interpretive framework that remains faithful to Islamic spirituality (Saeidi, 2023).

The metaphysical foundation of Nasr's Qur'anic hermeneutics is based on the principle of *gnosis*—knowledge attained through spiritual illumination and the purification of the soul. For Nasr, a true understanding of both reality and revelation can only be achieved through the transcendence of the ego and the union with higher truth. When addressing theological problems such as suffering and evil, Nasr offers a metaphysical theodicy that underscores the necessity of a holistic and transcendent perspective on reality (Cancelliere, 2023). Thus, his approach to the Qur'an is not merely intellectual but also existential and spiritual.

In addition, Islamic cosmology constitutes a vital pillar of Nasr's epistemological framework. He stresses that the relationship between human beings and the cosmos is symbolic and sacred, with every element of creation reflecting divine attributes. This understanding positions symbols and analogies as essential tools for bridging the meanings of the Qur'anic message. According to Nasr, reality should not be reduced to material objects but must be grasped as a structure of meaning imbued with transcendence (Robinson-Bertoni, 2017). Therefore, Nasr's approach to the Qur'an

integrates philosophy, spirituality, and exegesis, collectively forming a robust critique of modern reductionism and secular readings of revelation.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach based on library research, aiming to explore in depth Seyyed Hossein Nasr's critique of modernist and orientalist interpretative approaches in Qur'anic studies. The primary data consisted of Nasr's major works, including *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *The Study Quran*, and *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*. These sources were selected due to their central role in articulating Nasr's epistemological and hermeneutical perspectives. In addition to these, the study drew upon a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and previous research relevant to the topic.

The data were analyzed using content analysis combined with a philosophical-hermeneutical approach. This methodological framework enabled a systematic examination of the epistemological foundations, metaphysical assumptions, and hermeneutical implications of Nasr's thought in relation to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Through this analysis, the study sought to uncover the underlying principles of Nasr's sacred epistemology (*scientia sacra*), his critique of secular and reductionist approaches, and his proposal of a spiritually grounded alternative within the broader discourse of contemporary Islamic thought.

Result and Discussion

Nasr's Critique of Modernist Interpretations

Seyyed Hossein Nasr voiced his strong dissatisfaction with modernist approaches to Qur'anic interpretation, particularly due to their excessive emphasis on rationalism and historicism. In his view, such approaches neglect the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions that form the core essence of the sacred text. Nasr argued that the dominance of modern science within Islamic intellectual discourse has led to a decline in the understanding of the Qur'an's deeper meanings. He emphasized the need to revive *scientia sacra*—a sacred knowledge rooted in the spiritual tradition of Islam—as a counterbalance to rationalistic and empirical methods that are devoid of metaphysical depth (Mohammed Khalili, 2024; Mughal et al., 2022). In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr, (1981) asserted that true knowledge cannot be attained through reason alone but must rely on the intellect that is illuminated by revelation and spiritual intuition. His critique represents an urgent call to reorient Qur'anic hermeneutics towards a

framework that prioritizes inner insight and divine consciousness over secular epistemologies.

One of Nasr's most significant critiques of modernist thinkers lies in their tendency to reduce divine revelation to a mere product of historical or cultural circumstances. According to Nasr, this reductionist view places the Qur'an on par with profane texts, thereby ignoring its transcendent and universal nature. Such an approach, he argued, undermines the Qur'an's status as an eternal divine guide, transforming it instead into a historically bound document relevant only within its original socio-political context (Widiyanto, 2017). For Nasr, this tendency erodes the Qur'an's spiritual and metaphysical potential, which he believed to be its very heart and essence (S. H. Nasr & Jahanbegloo, 2010). Reducing revelation to historical data, in his view, risks severing the spiritual continuity that connects Muslims with the sacred. He strongly rejected such a perspective, warning that it endangers the survival of Islam's spiritual tradition (Nasr, 1975).

Nasr further expressed deep concern over the loss of the sacred and esoteric dimensions of the Qur'an caused by the prevalence of rationalist and historicist interpretations. He argued that the spiritual depth of the Qur'an cannot be accessed through scientific analysis alone but requires a hermeneutical approach rooted in inner consciousness and spiritual receptivity. Nasr firmly rejected interpretations based solely on modern academic frameworks, which he saw as sterile and stripped of sacrality. Instead, he advocated a return to traditional Islamic sciences and metaphysics to preserve and revitalize the Qur'an's transcendent core (Mughal et al., 2022; Widiyanto, 2017). In *Islamic Science*, Nasr, (1976) emphasized that knowledge in Islam has never been divorced from metaphysical foundations and divine orientation. Consequently, Qur'anic interpretation, he argued, must submit to spiritual principles rather than be confined to secular academic norms.

Within this context, Nasr was not alone. Thinkers such as Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin, and Frithjof Schuon similarly emphasized the importance of esoteric and contemplative dimensions in Qur'anic interpretation. These scholars also criticized modernist reductionism for eliminating the mystical and spiritual aspects of the sacred text. Through more contemplative approaches, they maintained that the Qur'an should be understood beyond the constraints of linguistic and rational analysis, engaging instead with symbolic meaning and spiritual realization (Laude, 2007). In *The Study Quran*, Nasr (2015), along with his team, systematically introduced a tafsir model that integrates literal, historical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions. This project represents a concrete effort to restore the traditional depth of Qur'anic reading amid the

current crisis in hermeneutics (Riza, 2023), serving as a modern bridge to classical esoteric interpretations.

As a point of comparison, the critique offered by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd of modernist approaches also merits attention. Although adopting a different methodology, Abu Zayd similarly challenged traditional views by advocating a humanistic hermeneutic. He emphasized the human dimension of the Qur'an and the active role of interpreters in the process of meaning-making (Sukidi, 2009). However, his approach provoked controversy, as it was seen by many as desacralizing the Qur'anic text. Nevertheless, Abu Zayd's critique of modernist reductionism intersects with Nasr's concern: both thinkers reject interpretative models that strip the Qur'an of its depth and sacredness, albeit from differing vantage points (Laude, 2007). While Nasr seeks a spiritual restoration of meaning, Abu Zayd proposes a socio-critical reconstruction of classical tafsir (Ahmad, 2023), reflecting the diversity of contemporary responses to modern hermeneutical challenges.

Nasr also identified a significant epistemological rupture between modern Muslim generations and the intellectual heritage of classical Islam as the root of today's Qur'anic interpretative crisis. He argued for the urgent need to rebuild bridges between the spiritual and intellectual readings of Islam, particularly through the metaphysical tradition developed over centuries. Nasr (1981) believed that only by reviving sacred and symbolic approaches can Muslims access the Qur'an's innermost dimensions. Revelation, in this view, must not merely be read, but deeply internalized through spiritual sensitivity and a conscious awareness of its metaphysical underpinnings. His call for reconnection with traditional epistemologies reflects a broader concern with the disintegration of Islamic sacred knowledge in the face of secular modernity.

Ultimately, Nasr's critique of modernist interpretations is rooted in his broader commitment to preserving the spiritual integrity of Islam amidst growing secularism and intellectual fragmentation. He rejected the notion that the Qur'an could be fully understood using modern critical tools such as historicism or sociological reductionism, both of which ignore the text's transcendent elements. For Nasr, a return to Islam's traditional roots—where rationality is integrated with spirituality—is the only viable path for maintaining the sacred character of the Qur'an in the modern age (Mohammed Khalili, 2024). His critique is not merely theological; it constitutes a comprehensive cultural and civilizational project aimed at recovering the spiritual foundations of Islamic thought and identity in a time of profound meaning crisis (S. H. Nasr, 1981).

Nasr's Critique of Orientalist Interpretations

Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers a sharp critique of orientalist approaches to Islamic texts, particularly concerning the foundational assumptions embedded in their methodologies. One of Nasr's primary objections targets the secular and skeptical presuppositions regarding revelation. He asserts that "the modern historical and philological approaches often operate upon the assumption that revelation is a purely human and historical phenomenon rather than a Divine reality" (Nasr, 2005). From his perspective, such a view is not only reductionist but also distorts the divine dimension of revelation, reducing it to a mere cultural or historical product of human experience. For Nasr, this position is incompatible with the Islamic tradition, which views the Qur'an as the direct word of God, transcending human construction. By stripping revelation of its transcendent source, orientalist frameworks undermine the sacred foundation upon which Islamic spirituality and epistemology are built.

Nasr's criticism is also directed at the dominance of purely philological approaches in Western Qur'anic studies. He expresses concern that such methodologies focus disproportionately on linguistic, historical, and sociological elements while neglecting the Qur'an's spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. In the introduction to *The Study Quran*, he emphasizes that these methods "focus solely on the historical, philological, and sociological aspects of the Quran, neglecting its spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, which are essential for understanding its full message" (Dakake et al., 2015). For Nasr, this methodological failure stems from a fundamental epistemological gap. It ignores the inner essence of the Qur'an and treats it merely as an object of academic scrutiny. Such approaches, in his view, fail to grasp the revelatory function of the Qur'an as a source of divine guidance that transcends mere textual analysis.

Nasr further contends that orientalist interpretations are not free from the biases of colonial ideology and Western cultural superiority. He argues that many Western readings of Islam are steeped in the legacy of colonialism, which tends to project European cultural dominance over Islamic civilization (Capezzone, 2020). This critique aligns closely with Edward Said's arguments in *Orientalism*, where he illustrates how the study of the East has often been constructed through exoticized and demeaning lenses. Nasr sees such orientalist narratives as misleading and distorted representations of Islamic history and teachings. In his view, the imbalance of power that underlies orientalist scholarship results in interpretative frameworks that mischaracterize Islam and ignore the internal epistemologies of the Muslim tradition.

As a solution to this epistemological impasse, Nasr proposes an alternative rooted in traditional and sacred knowledge, which he conceptualizes as *scientia sacra*. He describes *scientia sacra* as the highest form of knowledge that unites reason and revelation, thereby bridging the false dichotomy between science and religion (Widiyanto, 2017). In this paradigm, knowledge is not neutral or value-free but is oriented toward the divine. For Nasr, *scientia sacra* is both a critique of mechanistic, materialistic modern science and a call to recover a sacred worldview that recognizes the spiritual interconnectedness of all reality. It offers a foundational response to the disenchantment of knowledge in modernity and repositions Islamic epistemology as holistic, integrative, and metaphysically grounded.

Nasr's critique of modernity is also evident in his reflections on the global ecological and spiritual crises faced by humanity. He maintains that modernity has led to the alienation of human beings from the sacred cosmos, eroding the spiritual consciousness that once connected humans with the natural world (Safdar & Shams-Ur-rehman, 2021). In Nasr's view, this desacralized worldview reduces nature to a resource to be exploited, resulting in rampant consumerism devoid of ethical and spiritual restraint. Consequently, he advocates for a re-sacralization of Islamic cosmology and tradition as a necessary response to this crisis (Hussain, 2023). His ecological concerns are therefore not merely environmental but deeply theological, seeking to re-establish a divine order in the relationship between humanity, nature, and the Creator.

In the domains of education and theology, Nasr strongly emphasizes the central role of spirituality and metaphysics. He opposes educational paradigms that focus solely on rational and technical skills, advocating instead for a model of learning that nurtures the spiritual dimension of the human being (Shamshiri et al., 2020). According to Nasr, education should lead the human soul toward awareness of *Tawhid*—the oneness of God—by cultivating love, virtue, and intuitive awareness of divine reality. Without this spiritual orientation, he argues, education loses its transformative power and becomes incapable of elevating the human condition in its fullest sense. Thus, Nasr's vision for Islamic education re-centers the soul as the locus of knowledge, restoring the sacred to pedagogical practice.

Nasr's critique of orientalism also extends to the misrepresentation of Islamic science by Western scholars. He argues that science in the Islamic tradition is not merely an empirical methodology but is deeply intertwined with spiritual and cosmological objectives. According to Nasr, orientalist frequently fail to recognize this distinction, often evaluating Islamic science through incompatible Western criteria (Mughal et al., 2022). For Nasr, Islamic science operates within a metaphysical

framework that views knowledge as a reflection of divine order. Within the Perennialist and traditionalist framework he upholds, science is not value-neutral but part of a sacred cosmology. It is precisely this spiritual anchoring that distinguishes Islamic science from its modern counterpart and forms a key element of Nasr's broader project of epistemological decolonization.

Finally, Nasr's critique gains further clarity when juxtaposed with the perspectives of other contemporary Muslim intellectuals such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Fatima Mernissi, and Mohammed Arkoun. Abu Zayd, for instance, also challenged literalist-fundamentalist readings and proposed a contextual hermeneutic as an alternative (López-Farjeat, 2024). Mernissi and Arkoun emphasized the necessity of humanistic readings of Islamic texts as a means of liberating them from patriarchal hegemony and rigid orthodoxy (Karoui, 2020). While their approaches differ from Nasr's, they converge in their aim to free Islamic studies from reductionist paradigms—whether imposed externally by Western orientalism or internally by dogmatic interpretations. Together, these thinkers represent a plural but intersecting landscape of critique, seeking to restore depth, agency, and integrity to the field of Islamic thought.

Nasr's Alternative: A Return to Traditional and Sacred Hermeneutics

Seyyed Hossein Nasr proposes a profound and integrated alternative to Qur'anic interpretation, centered on a return to traditional and sacred hermeneutics. This approach emphasizes the esoteric and Sufi dimensions of revelation—perspectives often neglected in modern tafsir discourse, which tends to be rationalistic and positivist. In *The Study Quran* (2015), Nasr and his team offer a commentary rich in *bāṭin* (inner) meaning and spiritual symbolism, validating spiritual experience as a legitimate source of Qur'anic meaning. This tafsir does not solely prioritize literal or legal interpretations but presents multilayered insights into the Qur'anic verses—insights accessible only through spiritual intuition and sustained Sufi discipline. By placing spirituality at the core of hermeneutics, Nasr revives a dimension of interpretation rooted in centuries of Islamic tradition. His effort bridges the gap between scriptural exegesis and inner experience, offering a reading of the Qur'an that nourishes both the intellect and the soul.

The esoteric interpretative method aims to uncover inward meanings that transcend the text's external structure. Islamic traditions such as the Ismailis and Sufis have long embraced this model in shaping their theological frameworks. The Ismaili sect, for instance, consistently treats the Qur'an as a source of doctrine understood through inward interpretation, giving precedence to esoteric meaning over Hadith (Mahmut, 2024). Likewise, Sufi exegetes employ the *ishāra* method, relying on

spiritual experience, symbolism, and inward presence to comprehend divine guidance (İzmirli, 2020). Such approaches do not merely enrich Islamic thought but also create contemplative space for modern readers seeking spiritual depth in sacred texts. Through this lens, the Qur'an is not reduced to historical commentary or legal code, but emerges as a living wellspring of metaphysical insight, open to those who approach it with spiritual preparedness and sincerity.

Sufi hermeneutics, as advocated by Nasr, is inseparable from the role of intuition and spirituality in the interpretive process. In Islamic spirituality and Eastern philosophy, intuition is regarded as direct knowledge from the Divine—a form of elevated consciousness that surpasses analytical reasoning (Jagtiani, 2019). Nandram (2016) reinforces this view by describing intuition as rooted not in subconscious impulses, but in higher spiritual awareness. In the context of Qur'anic interpretation, intuition is not seen as uncontrolled subjectivity, but as a reflection of a disciplined soul attuned to divine knowledge. This is evident in the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī, who harmonizes reason with *ma'rifa* (gnosis) in his interpretative methodology (Junaidi et al., 2024). Nasr's hermeneutic therefore offers a compelling model: not an abandonment of reason, but its integration with metaphysical insight, drawing the interpreter into a deeper spiritual engagement with the sacred text.

Nasr's approach further emphasizes the integration of reason and spirituality in understanding revelation. In his traditional epistemology, as presented in *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), Nasr combines rational analysis with metaphysical intuition as two inseparable poles in accessing divine truth. He categorically rejects the dichotomy between intellectualism and mysticism, instead promoting integral knowledge that encompasses empirical, rational, and intuitive dimensions within a unified spiritual framework (Belkin et al., 2016). In this view, Qur'anic interpretation cannot be reduced to academic-linguistic methods alone; it demands a deep existential and spiritual involvement from the interpreter. This integration restores balance to the hermeneutical act, where mind and spirit work in harmony to uncover the layered meanings of revelation.

The practical implications of this holistic approach are far-reaching, particularly in religious education and decision-making. Interpretation becomes a dynamic interaction of intellect, intuition, and spiritual experience, facilitating a deeper and more contextual understanding of revelation. As Nandram et al. (2019) explain, this interpretive process is multi-layered and iterative, reflecting the complexity of engaging with sacred scripture. In this light, tafsir is not a final product, but a continuous spiritual transformation. It serves not merely as an academic exploration, but as a path to

illumination. Through this process, the reader is not just analyzing the text, but being reshaped by it—reoriented toward the divine reality at the heart of revelation.

In Nasr's view, the role of religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) and spiritual authorities is vital in preserving the authenticity of revelation's meaning. These figures are not merely textual interpreters, but custodians of tradition and spiritual guides for the community (Koester, 2015). The *'ulamā'* possess epistemological and spiritual legitimacy to convey divine truth within an authentic framework. They inherit classical methodologies such as *sanad* and *ijazah*, while also incorporating valid epistemic instruments (*pramāṇas*) recognized within Islamic intellectual tradition (Rambachan, 2014). Without their presence, the interpretation of revelation risks being fragmented by secular or individualistic approaches detached from the richness of tradition. Their authority ensures that meaning is conveyed with both intellectual rigor and spiritual integrity.

Spiritual authority, according to Nasr, is not merely academic or tied to formal credentials, but rooted in profound inner experience and the capacity to offer spiritual guidance. Such individuals are believed to access dimensions of the text that remain veiled to ordinary readings (Avis, 2021). For this reason, Muslim communities often view them as guardians of the sacred message and as transmitters of divine values in daily religious life. As Bradshaw (2021) notes, recognition of spiritual authority helps communities embrace revelation as sacred and guiding, not merely as legal code or doctrinal assertion. The presence of such figures sustains continuity in Islamic values, anchoring the community in the sacred while navigating the challenges of modernity.

The hermeneutics employed by traditional authorities also differs significantly from modernist approaches. Rather than confining themselves to grammatical or historical analysis, they incorporate spiritual, cultural, and symbolic perspectives in reading the Qur'an (Avis, 2024). This allows for interpretations that extend beyond surface-level meanings and enter into the realm of transcendent truths. It is this deeper interpretive layer that gives Sufi tafsir—as highlighted by Nasr—its unique existential depth, distinguishing it from secular or purely academic readings. Tafsir in this context becomes a journey toward *ma'rifa* (spiritual realization), not merely an exercise in textual comprehension. Through such an approach, the Qur'an is restored as a living, sacred reality that speaks directly to the soul.

Ultimately, the alternative interpretive model offered by Nasr through *The Study Quran* and *Knowledge and the Sacred* represents an invitation to return to a holistic and sacred Islamic epistemology. Esoteric exegesis does not dismiss outward methodologies but enriches and completes them. It regards the Qur'an as a living text—its meanings

inexhaustible by logic alone, yet continually revealed through intuition, spiritual experience, and guided insight. In a modern world marked by spiritual fragmentation and reductionist paradigms, Nasr's vision provides a bridge toward a more profound, integrative, and liberating understanding of revelation. His work affirms that true interpretation must awaken both the heart and the intellect, uniting reason and spirit in the quest for divine meaning.

Conclusion

Seyyed Hossein Nasr presents a sharp critique of modernist and orientalist interpretative approaches in Qur'anic studies. Although these two approaches emerge from different intellectual contexts, both represent secular and reductionist tendencies that neglect the spiritual and revelatory dimensions of the Qur'an. The modernist approach, with its emphasis on rationalism and historicism, and the orientalist approach, grounded in philological methods and textual criticism, tend to reduce the Qur'an to merely a historical and cultural text. According to Nasr, this perspective undermines the sacred and transcendent value of revelation and distances humanity from a deeper spiritual understanding of the Qur'an as the word of God.

In response to this condition, Nasr proposes an alternative approach based on traditional epistemology, which he terms *scientia sacra*. This approach integrates reason, intuition, and spiritual experience to access the inner meanings of the Qur'an. He calls for a return to sacred, Sufi, and transcendent interpretation, as exemplified in *The Study Quran*, a project he edited along with a team of scholars. Through this approach, Nasr not only revives classical exegetical methodologies rooted in the Islamic tradition but also enriches contemporary Qur'anic studies by opening space for esoteric, symbolic, and contemplative interpretations of revelation.

The implications of Nasr's thought are significant for the future of Qur'anic studies. Amid the intensifying currents of secularization and the fragmentation of meaning in the modern world, sacred hermeneutics offers a solid and enduring spiritual foundation. It encourages inner engagement, recognition of traditional authority, and integration between revelation and reason in interpreting the sacred text. Thus, Nasr's approach not only revitalizes the intellectual heritage of classical Islam but also provides a new direction for a more holistic and meaningful tafsir for contemporary and future Muslim generations.

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