

Monuments of intellect

By Sari Nuseibeh

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR:

Islamic Life and Thought

217pp. Allen and Unwin. £12.50.
0 04 297041 5

Islamic Life and Thought is a bold, somewhat overbearing attempt by Seyyed Hossein Nasr to provide the English-speaking reader with a panoramic view of Islamic intellectual activity. This view, unfortunately, is blurred by the author's personal and highly mystical interpretation of Islam. His enthusiastic mystification of things Islamic sometimes reaches unfathomable depths; as when he writes: "The only way to know Being is to realize our own non-existence and to live in awareness of our nothingness before the Reality which alone is and which in its inner infinitude transcends even Being." Where the language is fathomable, the total abstraction of his topics from their historical context often renders them Platonically mysterious: the author's belief that Islam transcends time or place makes it simple for him to reach such conclusions as that the cultural upsurge in the Islamic world was due primarily to "the characteristics of the Islamic revelation itself". But such conclusions are glaringly at odds with the fact that it was not men fired by Islamic zeal who most avidly pursued the so-called "rational sciences", but men whose attitude to the intellectual value of Islam was patronizing, like al-Farabi (d 950), or who were downright anti-religious, like al-Razi (d 925).

Nasr's belief in the transcendence of Islam places him among those who argue that the way to remedy all the social, economic and political ills of the Muslim world is by a return to the *Shari'ah*, or tenets of Islam. Thus, he thinks that it is merely a fashion to be against polygamy, which is in fact, or "transcendentally", a positive social phenomenon. According to the author, while men and women are "metacosmic",

the ideal Muslim state is the state of the glorious past, and the ideal activity for a Muslim is one through which he tries to emulate this past. Such views adequately explain the peculiar nature of modern Islamic "revolutions", which stand out from other revolutionary movements in being "regressive" rather than "progressive" in their aims.

The collection itself is fairly interesting, and some of its sections (eg on cultural and intellectual life) are usefully informative. But some areas of intellectual activity are not covered at all (eg art or literature). And, as it stands, the science section seems unnecessarily arid, disappointingly lacking in more detailed information on the interesting innovations that took place in Islam in such fields as mathematics, medicine or optics. Again, while one can excuse the author for not including mention of all the major Muslim intellectual figures, his ignoring of so towering a presence as Ibn Khaldun in the field of history is disappointing.

In the section on philosophy, Nasr devotes three quarters of his space to Mulla Sadra. This might seem like an unbalanced distribution, but it has its point. As Nasr correctly observes, Western scholarship is not in general cognizant of Muslim intellectual activity after the thirteenth century, when the bridge (Spain) between East and West was broken following the Christian reconquest. Major Persian philosophers of the seventeenth century (like Mulla Sadra) are thus totally unknown in the West. Nasr also points out that Muslim orientalist scholars too, being generally Western-educated, are unaware of the continuity of Muslim intellectual activity in Persia up to the present day. It is this continuity which explains the author's remarks, addressed to Muslim readers, concerning the need to return to Muslim roots through the medium of contemporary Persian intellectual activity.

Western ignorance, however, does not make Nasr's call for return to Muslim roots any more realistic. After all, students and propagators of the rational sciences in the Muslim

world allowed science to develop. But science has gone on developing, and has now developed outside Islam.

Some more technical objections might be raised also. Firstly, Mulla Sadra's distinctions between conditioned existence, non-conditioned existence, and so on, do not go back to al-Tusi, as Nasr suggests, but are found in Avicenna himself. It is true that in his commentary on Avicenna's *Directives*, al-Tusi uses these distinctions to explain a point which Avicenna makes, and that, in this particular context, Avicenna himself does not make them. But he had made them earlier in his *Shifa'*, and al-Tusi was doubtless referring to his analysis of them in that work. Secondly, Mulla Sadra's vocabulary in describing Being, while repeating almost verbatim the words used by the sufis of his school, as Nasr says, is actually reminiscent of Avicenna's descriptions of quiddities (*mahiyat*) in *al-Shifa'* and elsewhere. Thirdly, it is surprising that the author merely reports, but does not deny, or at least comment on the remark attributed to Mulla Sadra that he was the first in the Islamic milieu to have revived the doctrine of the identification between subject, object and act of knowledge. What, then, were the views of al-Farabi or Avempace on the subject? And who was Avicenna criticizing in his *De Anima*?

In conclusion, while the relationship between unity and multiplicity is central to sufi thought, one feels that not enough attention is given by Nasr to the notion of unity in *falsafah* (philosophy) itself (especially in the writings of al-Kindi and Avicenna), and that his discussion leaves a gap in our knowledge of the relationship between *falsafah* and sufism.

A mirror for princes



"Seated Youth" in the style of Aqa Riza. From The Imperial Iranian Paintings for the Mughal Court by Milo Cleveland Beach (237 pp. Fico Gallery of Art, £27. Paperback, £13.50. 0 934086 37 8).

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