



## Perennial Philosophy in the Intellectual Foundations of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt

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### **Abstract**

Perennial philosophy holds that there is something hidden in all transcendent matters that does not belong to a particular period of history and to a particular geographical location. Rather, it exists at all times and is transferred from one period to another as a tradition. Therefore, the term tradition in Perennial philosophy is the same as the sacred intellect that lies in the institution of all these transcendent affairs. Among the thinkers who sought to discover the foundations of Perennial philosophy were Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt. Perennial philosophy and traditionalist views have always formed the main and deep theories of these two thinkers. It can also be argued that the traditionalist view of the world has influenced all of Nasr and Burckhardt's scientific theories. What has been studied in this article is the study and analysis of the views and opinions of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt about Perennial philosophy, and the purpose of this research is to extract the basics of Perennial philosophy based on the views of these two thinkers among their works.

**Keywords:** *Perennial Philosophy; Traditionalism; Seyyed Hossein Nasr; Titus Burckhardt*

### **Introduction**

Perennial philosophy is a philosophical tradition of the world's great thinkers from Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas to their modern successors dealing with problems of ultimate reality as the nature of being and sometimes emphasizing mysticism (Merriam-Webster: Perennial philosophy). However, Perennial philosophy is the eternal and stable tradition that its foundations are unalterable. In fact, the foundation of Perennial philosophy has spaceless and timeless. In terms, this foundation has tradition. The term was first used in the West by Augustine Stoichus. After him, the German philosopher Leibniz use this term in a treatise (Schuon, 2005: 1). In the Islamic world, Suhrawardi (Sheik al Ishraq) mentions many phrases that equivalent with this term (Suhrawardi, 2002b: 259; Ibid, 2002d: 94). Also, Seyyed

Hossein Nasr mentions to term (Al Hekmat al Dini) that mentioned by Suhrawardi, he believes that Suhrawardi aim from used this term, same Perennial philosophy (Nasr, 2009: 62). Actually, Perennial philosophy or Antique philosophy has an eternal philosophy that has been in human nature from genesis (Ebrahimi Dinani: 2000, 14).

Traditionalist scholars in Contemporary Era such as F. Schuon, R. Guenon, T. Burckhart and S. H. Nasr they paid special attention to Perennial philosophy. Their also provided new systematic theorise in this case. In this paper on based survey and study to theorise of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt in different positions, many foundations of Perennial philosophy extracted.

### **Research Methods**

This study is accomplished descriptive- analytical and through library method. We first study and survey the book and articles from Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt, then we study many references about traditionalism which complemented this research. Afterwards in this article the theories of these two philosophers are comparing.

### **Tradition**

In Nasr's opinion the tradition that is our intent, is synonymous with Sophia perennis i.e. Divine Tradition or Divine wisdom. So, traditions this here versus tradition in mean conventional that is mean obsolescence. Tradition to means conventional is obscene, if so that mean not obscene, at least not applied hither, rather in their tradition to originally mean namely Eternal tradition. Also, Tradition to mean Divine tradition is permanent and unchangeable. This tradition is present to all of the time and era and all of the people can use this tradition (Nasr, 2001: 19).

In Dr. Nasr view, Tradition containing the fact that has a super personal nature. This nature has root in reality (Ibid, 156). Hence, in his opinion, tradition namely facts or basics that have Divine origin and it makes human connect to the supernal world (Ibid, 135; Ibid, 2006: 120).

He believes that tradition does not mean to ceremonial, rather tradition in originally mean, are Divine doctrines and supernatural and applying Divine tradition provides an understanding of metaphysical principles at all times and places (Ibid, 2003: 61). Also he has claimed that tradition includes all of spiritual relationship, social structure and people relationship (Ibid, 2006: 23). Therefore, he believes that tradition according to religion, hence understood with the most general mean (Ibid, 2003: 61). Also, in Schuon's opinion tradition to mean religion (Schuon, 1993: 96; Ibid, 1984: 101).

Burckhardt knows tradition as the main transmission of sacred wisdom (Burckhardt, 1995: 5). He writes in another position that tradition does not mean old or obsolescence, in fact tradition to mean something that human receives from God and the heavenly world (Ibid, 1993: 96).

### **Intellect**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr points to that there is a fundamental difference between two concepts of ratio and the intellect (Nasr, 1993: 78; Ibid, 2006: 136). Rene Guenon, who is also, followers Perennial philosophy his points to this issue. He says that there is a different between partial intellect and the logos or Sophia perennis, as he puts it: "Whatever insight is tighter, it is considered more rational" (Guenon, 1982: 104). Suhrawardi also has mentioned to Sophia perennis in *Hikmat al- Ishraq* (Suhrawardi, 2002b: 10). Sophia perennis is the Logos or eternal wisdom; thereby not at all we do not say that Sophia perennis

is same to rational or partial intellect, because partial intellect has evolution and transition (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2005: 26). Also, Henry Corbin believes that in the dominion of Perennial philosophy there is no geography. He says that the history of transfer of Sophia perennis has been done by two series of philosophers, namely Iranian philosophers (Khosravanion), and Greek philosophers. Corbin says they are guardians of words (Hafezan al Kalamah) on both the East and West sides (Corbin, 2014: 35). As a result no difference between Western philosophers and Eastern philosophers in Perennial philosophy, because it is well evident that both of them derived by one origin.

Also, the different among partial intellect (ratio) with Sophia perennis (intellect) it can be seen in Persian literature as well, e.g. Ferdowsi begins the Shahname with the praise of intellect (Ferdowsi, Shahname). Mawlana Jalal al- Din also ridicules the ratio, but he praise of Sophia perennis and he knows it like a master (Morid) and an old man (Sheikh), but the old man he means an eternal thing (Mawlana, 1994: Daftar V).<sup>1</sup>

Titus Burckhardt fleshes out that mystical love is the same as knowledge and Sophia perennis, but they mayhap different in appearance, while they are inwardly the same. He to prove his claim, points to Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi as representatives of intellect and Mansour Halaj and Mawlana as representatives of Love (Burckhardt, 1995: 30- 34). So according to Burckhardt love and Sophia perennis originally are the same, but differ in appearance.

It should be noted that traditionalists mean than distinction among Sophia perennis with ratio do not mean the opponent, rather the traditionalists believes that both intellect are along each other. On the other hand, ratio and partial intellect is the manifestation of wisdom, but because that beyond the partial intellect is another intellect, namely Sophia perennis. So Sophia perennis is originality, also it should be noted partial intellect per se is not originality. Accordingly turns out that Nasr and Burckhardt, by no means that against with ratio, rather they mean the originality of sacred intellect.

### ***Sacred Science***

Sacred science is another foundations and doctrines of Perennial philosophy. Seyyed Hossein Nasr according to traditionalism worldview says that the position of knowledge is not human mind, rather, the true position of knowledge in Divine wisdom (Nasr, 2008: 68). In his view the base of sacred science is in metaphysics (Ibid, 2003: 25), i.e. sacred science in first occasion compatible with human nature, and in second occasion, it preparing the human soul for propelling to supernal world (Ibid, 2001: 308).<sup>2</sup>

Also, Burckhardt says sacred science is knowledge that does not emphasize the mind. Rather its place is the heart of the universe (Burckhardt, 1995: 32).

Actually, In Burckhardt's opinion, sacred science is a super personal knowledge. In this regard, sacred science is the emanation of Divine Beauty and Majesty. Therefore sacred science due to infinite origin and cause for immaculate of human mind<sup>3</sup>.

Sacred science does not merely cover to natural science, rather so that connection for theology and metaphysics, containing to many affairs and describing them. For instance, Dr. Nasr by the view of sacred science explains of ascension (Miraj) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Nasr, 2014: 51- 52).

<sup>1</sup> Most Persian poets have been philosophers and mystics and their poems have philosophical content (Nasr, 2010: 88, Burckhardt, 1995: 33).

<sup>2</sup> دست را مسپار جز در دست پیر / حق شده است آن دست او را دستگیر

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, sacred science is distinct with sacred knowledge. Actually, sacred science understands outwardly system (Hasanpour, Dehghani and Avani, 2019, 121).

Also, it should be noted that, both of thinkers according to sacred science, provided sacred art. In sacred science imagination, all of creatures and phenomena are Divine manifestation. So, sacred art also has this imagination (Ingare). As a result, scientist and an artist in Perennial philosophy are important and holy jobs.

In Dr. Nasr opinion, all religions are Divine manifestation and he considers Islamic art as a sacred art and he says all of the Islamic arts the best means for understanding the essence of Islam (Ibid, 2015: 222). We can conclude; art can understand the essence of phenomena. Burckhardt is also saying sacred art indicates the fact (Burckhardt, 2013: 7).

## ***Sufism***

Sufism (Tasawof) or spiritual conduct, in order to search for divine as an infinite fact. Namely God is eternal and endless origin for all of the inspirations and revelations. Hence, Sufism is the means by which human can from it achieves the origin of inspirations (Nasr, 2002: 174).

The origin of inspiration is one of the sacred intellect manifestations, and the other words same Sophia perennis. Sufism in the Nasr's thought is most important, because, Sufism is a one of the foundations of Perennial philosophy. Actually, Sufism is the condition of reaching to Sophia perennis.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr believes that Sufism one of the most important and efficiently spiritual credo for mystics. He says that Sufism is eternal and endless tradition and added which Sufism substance is timeless, and Sufism as a tradition at all times expresses, its principles in a language appropriate to the intellectual requirements of the time (Ibid, 2006: 101). In Nasr's opinion, Sufism is a best manner for inner perfection and cognition.

He wrote in another book Sufism is a Divine deposit from mercy aspect and it is in heavenly revelation. Sufism has given the key to unfurling the secret of the universe to human himself. This key enables people to achieve treasure, and the mean of treasure this context is same human substance that pretty precious. In addition, this key makes it possible to reach this treasure. Also, should be added that unfortunately, human is neglectful of this treasure. Therefore, Sufism makes possible to achieve this important affair and i.e. offers self-knowledge and theology for humankind. Man with tradition and Sufism rules, can understand who and literally die in the sense that is (Ibid, 1998: 60).

Titus Burckhardt believes that, Sufism is a way to self- knowledge and theosophy. He to prove his claim mentions a Prophetic Hadith "Whoever knows himself, will know God". He says that eventually this knowledge is applied about Divine essence. Also, this knowledge transcends any kind of cosmological and psychological perspective (Burckhardt, 1995: 38).

Burckhardt considers the nature of Sufism to esoteric. Because in his opinion, direct spiritual conduct is different by doing conditional that in special human section is manifested. So, Sufism has an aim within itself and that target is a concept that offers direct cognition to perception of eternal fact for mystics (Ibid, 1995: 9).

According this topic, should be mentioned that Professor Nasr considers Sufism to be the heart of any religion (Nasr, 2005: 193). Burckhardt has said the same thing; he said "Sufism is the heart of Islam" (Burckhardt, 1995: 9).

## ***Perfect Man***

It is alleged that the Perfect Man (Haghighat al- Muhammadiya) is one of the important basics of Perennial philosophy.

Basically the most important thing in contingent universe is the Perfect Man. Thus, it can be said that Perfect Man is a pure manifestation of Sophia perennis. Also, Avicenna and Suhrawardi referred to the Perfect Man in their various books by expressing other term (Ibn Sina, 1991: 5; Suhrawardi, 2002a: 211; Ibid, 2002b: 12, 259; Ibid, 2002c: 228). As well as, in Suhrawardi views, Perfect Man is Book Master (Ghayam al- Ketab) and Great Rhetoric Master (Saheb al- Khotb al- Azim) (Ibid, 2002b: 259).

Of course, the term of “Perfect Man” was first said by Mohi al- Din Ibn Arabi (Ibn Arabi, 2008: 70).

Nasr and Burckhardt have many theories about the Perfect Man. If we study their opinions about this problem, it can be concluded that Perfect Man is the foundations of Perennial philosophy. Furthermore, many spiritual traditions that always been the focus of Nasr and Burckhardt have paid special attention to the Perfect Man both in terms of concept and application. For instance, Iranian people in ancient Iran considered Kiomars to be the first Perfect Man. Ferdowsi has mentioned several perfect Men in Shahname (Ferdowsi, Shahname).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr says about Perfect Man as a principle that is one of the inwardly convictions in Islam and unique principle in Sufism (Nasr, 2006: 131- 132). Moreover, Titus Burckhardt says that because the Divine injunction is unit, therefore, it has only a single object. As a result, creation from Divine view is gathered in one object that includes all of attributes without dissociation (Burckhardt, 1995: 84).

In Nasr's opinion the prophets (Anbiya), saints (Auliya) and Sufi masters (Morid) are perfect Men (Nasr, 2006: 133). Also, Burckhardt says that whoever achieves to transcendental identity are Perfect Men. All of the prophets and saints and masters, reached to this identity. So, all of prophets, saints and masters are Perfect Men (Burckhardt, 1995: 88).

In addition, Nasr and Burckhardt fleshes out that, all of Perfect Man are branched of one spiritual fact, and in mystical term said Haghighat al- Muhammadiya. Also the purposes of all perfect Men are reaching to this fact<sup>4</sup> (Nasr, 2006: 132- 133; Burckhardt, 1995: 89).

So, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as this fact is the most perfect among Perfect Men. Further he is the most perfect from all of the phenomena and creatures.

Of course, it should be mentioned, the phrase of Perfect Men has a metaphor. In view of the fact that, Perfect Men are one spirit. Hence, this spirit is same the Holy Spirit (Haghighat al- Muhammadiya). So that, another prophets and saints are glimmer of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Noor Muhammadi).

As a consequence of, it is argued that, eternal and Divine traditions and sacred fact from God has been granted to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a Perfect Man. So way, the goal of Perennial philosophy is an attain to Divine traditions. Wherefore a person who is looking for this, he must follow to Perfect Man, videlicet prophets, saints and masters, especially Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

<sup>4</sup> The holy Qur'an says in this regard: “Surely we belong to Allah and to him shall we return” (Al- Baghara, 156).  
(انا لله وانا اليه الرجوعون)

### ***Transcendental Unity of Religions (religious Pluralism)***

Perennial philosophy accepts sacred affair as a one of the foundations. So, this affair requires that transcendental unity of religions to be one of the principles of the Perennial philosophy. Owing to the fact that sacred affair is a spiritual category (Nasr, 2005: 135). In according with, human views to all phenomena as one of the Divine Names and Attributes. It should be pointed out that all of religions have sacred affair and spoke about God. Thereby sacred affair as a fundamental substance is in common among religions.

A fundamental question that proposed in this case such is: Can many religions all be true? Dr. Nasr answers:

We are immediately confronted by the fact that there are two polls that determining the way we think one is in a sense universalism on its particularism. For example, you think of a triangle. A triangle is a triangle is a universal mathematical concept but you never see triangle you say this triangle you plain pool and there is that triangular figure you put the balls in i.e. particular triangle and so our experience oscillates both mentally and outwardly between what you call the universal and the particular in the philosophical sense you see incredible universal characteristics which manifests themselves and all the religions for example do unto others and others have to do unto you or some formulas similar to it. It is different from specific moral action in different religions. But it is a spiritual moral quality that is as universal as you found everywhere so everywhere even whit in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism where ever you are in a sense you have a particularity of that universal principle on the middle physical level is even more evident (Ibid, 2015).

And another key problem about this topic such is: Despite that God is a unit, why religions are diverse? What does it mean? In Nasr opinion, Unity of God does not lead to unity of prophecy. By reason of, God as Infinite Essence has created the universe and this universe includes several phenomena. This means that, universe is the manifestation of multiplicity. This multiplicity includes human order. Thence, revelation and prophecy are necessary for the universe.

It is therefore, human was created from single spirit, but afterwards he divided to several races and tribes. The only human origin requires unity in human nature. As a consequence, if religion has an absolute unit message cannot come for a part of humanity. Accordingly, the multiplicities of religions are necessary. However, several religions are reflections of Divine Omnipotence that God has willed (Nasr, 2015: 35- 36).

Nasr wrote in the book entitled *Ideals and Realities of Islam*: Every revelatory religion, is religion, since includes fact and comprises a way for reach it. Also, is one of the religions, insomuch emphasizes to specific aspect for his followers (Ibid, 2008, 33).

### ***Analysis of His Opinion***

The foundation and substance of all religions is same, because the base of all true religions is Divine Essence (Zat Aghdas). As well as, the Divine Essence is absolute abstraction and all of absolute abstraction is free of language, time and space, therefore Divine Essence as an absolute abstraction is free of language, time and space. In the other phrase, God is timeless and spaceless. Also, it should be pointed out that language, time and space are the cause of dispersion. Thereby, essence of nature is requiring that humans are distinction from each other. It is worth recalling, this requires is a part of Divine traditions, So, Divine Wisdom requires that preserve these traditions. Therefore, it needs to be said, all religions

regarding time, geography, culture and language is different from each other, but this distinction is not essential. Whereas, natures of all humans are similar to each other and Divine religion as an eternal, permanent and infinite tradition is same and steady. As a result, this different is an appearance difference, and this difference does not imply the true plurality among religions.

On the other side, this thought is also present in Burckhardt's works. First of all, he for represent of him art thought and fundamentals of sacred art, compares and argues sacred art among spirituality traditions. We can conclude that, he believes that the origin of art among spiritual traditions is unit. Therefore, since that origin of art is homologous among these traditions. Accordingly, we came to the conclusion that transcendental unity of religions is exist (Burckhardt, 2013: 17, 101, 131, 159, 179, and 193).

Second, we can conclude from his view about the Holy Spirit. He believes that Holy Ghost is origin of all revelations and inspirations to prophets. He says that spirit as a supreme mediator is first inspiration or same to prophetic manifestations. So, with Gabriel that offered Holy Word (Rouh Allah) to Holy Mary and taught Holy Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is adapted (Ibid, 1995: 82).

Third, from Burckhardt's imagination (Ingare) about Sufism, we get it that he knows, mysticism is the inward of any religions and Sufism is the inward of Islam. Therefore, any religion has an interior and that inward has an in common substance among religions, e.g. this in common substance in Islam is Sufism. Thereby, forms and names to proportion of language, time (history) and space (geography) is different, but base is in common among all of religions. Burckhardt says: Sufism in the Islamic world like the human heart, because the heart is the center of body. In fact, Sufism is beyond of all human forms (Ibid, 1985: 11).

## **Conclusion**

According to Nasr and Burckhardt's opinions, we realize that traditionalism has a first doctrine in Perennial philosophy. The mean of tradition in this school is a sacred affair that issued from God and that is eternal and is not bound by time and space. Also, that is affair has closely related with wisdom and Sophia perennis, and in other terms, all of the fundamentals of Perennial philosophy is manifestation of Divine eternal and permanent traditions.

Sophia perennis or sacred intellect is second foundation in the Perennial philosophy. The meaning of intellect to this paradigm is pure and intuitive reason and pure reason provides true knowledge beings for mankind. Sacred intellect is distinct with partial intellect, since, partial intellect does not include many transcendental affairs. Additionally, partial intellect is changeable. While the Sophia perennis is permanent and infinite, because it is in accordance with the sacred tradition.

Sacred science as another basis of perennial philosophy is a tool for humans. This tool empowers human to achieve the sacred affairs. Also, this tool empowers humankind to accurate explain many phenomena. In addition, sacred science is not an artificial and mechanical science, rather it is live science and considered as one of the manifestations of the Divine traditions.

In intellectual paradigm of Perennial philosophy, existence of a school for the conduct of mystics is necessary. This school must be able to identify sacred affair and eternal tradition. Nasr and Burckhardt introduce Sufism, because, Sufism has the ability to help mystics to gain permanent and truth knowledge. However, identify and reach to sacred affair and Divine tradition is main goal of Perennial philosophy. Therefore, the role of Sufism is a basic role in Perennial philosophy. As a result, Sufism is one of the foundations of this intellectual tradition.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt pay special attention to the Perfect Man. They have set Perfect Man as the one of the foundations of Perennial philosophy. Prophets, Saints and Sufi masters are Perfect Men, and they have understood the Divine traditions. So, everyone for reach to sacred affair and Divine tradition, they have no choice but to connection with Perfect Man. Hence, Perfect Man is a key concept in the Nasr and Burckhardt's foundations. Moreover, the essence of all Perfect Men is the same. This essence is Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Whereby, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is a main and important basis in Perennial philosophy.

In Nasr and Burckhardt's theories, we understood that, religions have two approaches. Namely outwardly approach and inwardly approach. Outwardly approach related to historical and geographical conditions, even diversity of languages and cultures between nations are affected. For this reason, various religions are available in the world. On the other hand, religions have inwardly approach that this approach in common among all of the transcendental religions. This approach is free of time and space conditions. Accordingly, inward dimension in the religions is timeless and spaceless. As well as, thus approach have a transcendental identity, namely it is a metaphysical fact. Also, inwardly dimension in the religions is a one thing that similar in all religions. Therefore, religions are carriers' Divine tradition and sacred affair. As a result, the guidance of religions has an important role to Divine tradition and sacred affair. We conclude that, transcendental unity of religions is one of foundations in Perennial philosophy.

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