

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Interview at Sacred Web Conference 2014

The following is a text edited by both Ali Lakhani and S.H.Nasr of an on-stage interview of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, conducted by M.Ali Lakhani, before an audience on the second day of the Sacred Web Conference, held at Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, on the morning of Sunday, April 27, 2014.

Lakhani: Thank you very much, Dr. Nasr, for agreeing to this interview. I have a lot of questions for you and, just so that the audience knows, Dr. Nasr has not been primed on any of the questions—neither I nor he wished that to happen, so this is totally unrehearsed. I am going to start, Dr. Nasr, by referring to this morning's news.

There has been a controversy in England over the issue of religion and secularism. Prime Minister David Cameron has recently referred to Britain as a Christian nation and that seems to have sparked off somewhat of a reaction. The secularists are saying that this is wrong, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has now weighed in, commenting that Britain is in a post-Christian era, that the level of religiosity is declining, and the prospects as he sums them up seem bleak.

The former Archbishop's analysis reflects the trends in North America too, as shown for example by the Pew Research Centre's surveys on religion, which establish that there is a secularist drift in modern society.

So I have two questions about this. The first is why is this so? And the second is: What is the solution?

Dr. Nasr: First of all, I wish Britain were a Christian nation. If it were really so, they would not have attacked Iraq. Upon what "Christian" basis would Tony Blair have assisted in the killing and wounding of a million

Muslims and Christians in Iraq? Let us be frank with each other. It is too late in my life to just be politically correct and simply diplomatic. I try to speak the truth as I see it whenever I can. So obviously Britain is not a Christian nation. There is a residue of Christianity that is left in England, as there is in all of Western Europe. None of the Western European countries can be called "a Christian nation." Only 5% of British Christians go to church on Sundays. France was once called the bride of the Catholic Church but now she is a very disobedient bride. Less than 10% of people in France go to church. And if you go to any great cathedral, whether it be in London or Paris, on a Sunday morning, you will see what is going on.

I once went to St. Sulpice which is a famous 17th-century cathedral in Paris, at the time of mass, to see what was going on. It is a very large church with a vast hall. There were about 90 people in the first row, all above the age of 80. And the rest of this vast space was completely empty. It was such a symbol of religion in Europe today. This is in a sense a very paradoxical thing, because in the middle of the 20th century, as the famous sociologist Peter Berger has written, there was a gradual shift globally away from secularization to what he calls "de-secularization." He said that this process is beginning to take hold and that religion is once again entering into the arena of the global political and social world, not just in private matters, but in public matters. This trend includes also wars, religious wars that go on from Bosnia, to Palestine and Israel, to India and Kashmir, to Pakistan, all of these places, with the net result that it is almost impossible to see a conflict in the world today where religion does not play a role. But I need to add that the only continent which has not participated in this re-sacralization, you might say, to some extent, of bringing religion back into contemporary history, is Western Europe. Whenever people ask me why this is so, I say jokingly that it is because in France the coffee tastes so good you do not have to think about religion, and in America the coffee is so bad you have to think of something else to save your soul.

Secularism emerged from the culture that grew in Western Europe, especially in France but also Germany, the Netherlands, and to some extent England, in the 17th century, in a part of the world that considered itself to be intellectually superior to the rest of the globe. The idea of "progress" started in Western Europe. It did not begin in Asia. This is

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