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**Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam Mystical Tradition*, New York, Harper One, 2007, pp. 256, ISBN: 978-0-06-079722-5**

*The Garden of Truth* written by Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr signifies the maturity and importance of Islam and Sufism/‘*Irfan* in the Western World. The “exotic” and “mystifying” orient is no longer the distant subject of research and study of the occident, rather, the orient has washed ashore on the banks of the occident and has gained life outside universities and lecture rooms to become a living, dynamic and vibrant reality in the West. This is certainly true of Islam and Sufism, which today are not only studied in Western universities but more importantly are practiced daily by diverse communities of believers living across different parts of the Western World, some of whom are migrants and their children and some are westerners who in their quest for freedom from the chains of materialism and consumerism have embraced Islam and in some cases have entered the mystical path and embarked on the journey of union with Allah which is referred to as Sufism or ‘*Irfan*. As a response to this living multi-faceted reality, in the past decades there has been a growing number of scholarly works produced in the West, dealing with the different dimensions of Islam, one of which is Sufism.

One of the important aspects of Professor Nasr’s *The Garden of Truth* is that it is the product of not only one of the most important and prolific contemporary Muslim intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century whose immense body of work has been a beacon of light for students of Islam across the world, many of whom particularly in the English speaking world are directly or indirectly his students,

but also a living Sufi master and *hakim* who has walked and breathed in the path of the great Islamic scholars of the past. *The Garden of Truth* is not only the product of research in Islam and Sufism, rather as the author states himself it is the result of “an existential participation in Sufism”<sup>1</sup>.

*The Garden of Truth* is one of the best introductory books on Sufism in the English language. What distinguishes it from other similar works is that it is not simply an academic introduction to Sufism but rather it is an introductory practical and theoretical manual written with a contemporary approach and language for those who are interested in walking on the mystical path of Islam. It should be noted that it can be argued that *The Garden of Truth* is not an introductory book to Sufism in the sense that Chittick’s *Sufism: A Brief Introduction* or Martin Lings’ *What Is Sufism?* are, as it does not aim to present Sufism in an academic context, as a subject matter to be studied, but rather the simple language of the book and its structure which begins with the existential question of “Who am I?” have been designed to introduce Sufism as a way of life and as a mechanism for opening the doors of The Garden of Truth to those who yearn to drink from the Divine wine of love and union. If we are to answer the question why is this book in particular and Islam and Sufism in general relevant to Western individuals we can return to Nasr’s excellent commentary on *Surat al-Fatiha* and the status of the human being; Nasr writes, “The grandeur of the human state is not in that human beings can make complicated machines or conceptualize complex theories, but in that men and women are worthy of being addressed by God and being considered worthy of receiving His revelation and guidance.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the central and recurring themes present in the book, is the placement of Sufism firmly within the heart of Islamic orthodoxy. Nasr time and again makes note of two important and interrelated aspects of Sufism. The first is that Sufism existed from the beginning of Islam and has its roots in the sacred text i.e. the Qur’an

and furthermore the *Sunnah* of the Prophet of Islam<sup>3</sup>, and the second is that Sufism is naught without the *Shari'ah*. Another one of the important aspects of the books, in light of discussions of epistemology the rise of neo-Sufism and the definition of Spiritual traditions as experienced and emotive based, is Nasr's constant emphasis on Sufism being a path of knowledge and liberation.

One section of the book that could have been expanded upon is the notion of *wilayah* which has been briefly covered in the book. As *wilayah* plays a central role in both practical and theoretical Sufism the concept of *wilayah* as expounded in *Shi'a* Islam, which Professor Nasr has dealt with in depth elsewhere<sup>4</sup> could have been covered in this book. This is in order to stress, on the one hand, on the presence of the Perfect Human being in our time and, on the other hand, the continuation of Divine guidance and bestowal of Divine grace and blessings through the Perfect Human who is the Divinely appointed successor of the Prophet of Islam and also the *wali* of our time and the *Qutb al-aqtab* (the pole of the poles).

All spiritual *Tariqah's* in the Islamic world initiate their chain from Imam Ali and through him Prophet Muhammad. Many of the *Tariqah's* through Ma'ruf Karakhi relate themselves to Imam Ridha, and through Imam Ridha to Imam Ali, prominent examples of such *Tariqah's* include Shadhiliyya, Ni'matullahiyya and Safaviyya, The Ma'rufiyya Silsilah which is famously referred to as *Umm ul Salasil* meaning the mother of *Silsilahs*, due to the fact that *silsilah's* of Sufism originate from this *silsilah*, such as the Suhrawardiyya, Noorbakhshiyya, Safaviyya, Ni'matolahiyya, Zahabiyya, Baktashiyya, Rifa'iyya, Nakhshbandiyya, Jamaliyya, Shadhiliyya and Qadiriyya, through Kumayl ibn Ziyad and Hassan al-Basri go back to Imam Ali<sup>5</sup>. Further Imam Sajjad's book of supplication titled *Sahifa Sajjadiyah* famously referred to as *The Zabur AI Muhammad*, after Imam Ali's *Khutbat ul-Muttaqeen* and Imam Hussain's *Du'a A'rafah* is the most important classic spiritual text of Islam. It should also be noted that the twelve Imams played a

significant role in expounding the esoteric dimensions of the Qur'an and the 14 infallibles are revered in many Sufi *tariqah*'s.

*The Garden of Truth* is composed of six main chapters, which are: 1. What It Means to Be Human (Who Are We and What Are We Doing Here?) 2. Truth (The Knowledge That Illuminates and Delivers from the Bondage of Ignorance.) 3. Love and Beauty (The Fire That Attracts and Consumes, the Peace That Calms and Liberates.) 4. Goodness and Human Action (To Do His Will, to Conform to the Divine Norm.) 5. How Do We Reach the Garden of Truth? (The Path to the One.) 6. Access to the Centre (Sufism Here and Now.)

*The Garden of Truth* also has two appendices that discuss the historical manifestation of Sufism and theoretical Sufism, the appendices are titled: 7. The Sufi Tradition and the Sufi Orders (Reflections on the Manifestation of Sufism in Time and Space) 8. The Tradition of Theoretical Sufism and Gnosis.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2007), *The Garden of Truth*, New York: Harper One, p xiii

<sup>2</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2007), *The Garden of Truth*, New York: Harper One, p 16

<sup>3</sup> This topic has been covered on numerous occasions by Nasr, for a full explanation of the Qur'an and Sunnah as roots of Sufism by Nasr see: Nasr, Seyyed Hossain (2000). *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc. pp. 115-140 (The Tariqah - The Spiritual Path and its Qur'anic Roots.)

<sup>4</sup> For example see Nasr, Seyyed Hossain (2008). 'Shi'ism and Sufism: their Relationship in Essence and in History'. In Safavi, Seyed G, *Sufism ('Irfan)*, London: LAIS Press.

<sup>5</sup> Ma'sum Shirazi, Muhammad, (1382). *Taraiq al-Haqayiq*, vol 2, p 305 – 307, Tehran: Sanai publications.