2013

From Up in the Air to the Roots of Pandora's Tree of Souls: Hossein Nasr's Islamic Traditionalism and the Hope for Western Futures Grounded in the Sacredness of the Earth

Daniel O'Dea Bradley
Gonzaga University, bradleyd@gonzaga.edu

FROM *UP IN THE AIR* DOWN TO THE ROOTS OF *AVATAR'S* TREE OF SOULS: HOSSEIN NASR'S ISLAMIC TRADITIONALISM AND THE HOPE FOR WESTERN FUTURES GROUNDED IN THE SACREDNESS OF THE EARTH

Daniel Bradley (Gonzaga University)

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes are perennial favorites for script writers and directors in the world of English language film; however, recent projects, both those aiming only for commercial success and those attempting higher artistic expression, seem to reveal a particular pre-occupation with portrayals of a dark and menacing time to come. The unifying theme of many of these films is the call to hold onto what is beautiful and good in our humanity in the face of grave dangers that threaten to darken the human spirit.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2009), Vigo Mortensen's character shares a miserable post-apocalyptic existence with his son scavenging for food and avoiding cannibals, but he makes it clear to the boy that mere survival is not the goal. Instead, his son must always "carry the fire" in his heart and thus hold onto his humanity in a world that threatens to reduce human beings to the level of pure savagery. In the *Book of Eli* (2010), Denzel Washington plays the part of a prophetic hero who carries the last remaining copy of the Bible through the dangers of a world turned to chaos and finally arrives at the sanctuary of Alcatraz where a tiny band of men and women have created a library and are nurturing the collective wisdom of humanity through the disordered times into which the world has fallen. The film *2012* (2009) was clearly less artistically ambitious than *The Road* or even *The Book of Eli*, and our impatience at its rather clumsy storyline can perhaps obscure the fact that the film is referencing the oldest surviving apocalyptic tales we know, the Near Eastern flood stories that that were molded through Hebraic inspiration into the teaching of "Noah's Ark." It is on the power of this tale that *2012* wants to hitch a free ride, and if the film fails artistically, it succeeds in revealing a certain spirit of our times. For us today, the perennial theme of the prophet calling his or her people to remain resolute and steadfast in the midst of impending

moral and social disorder, so that at least a few may be inspired to "carry the fire" through the coming dark, seems to resonate in a powerful way and well beyond the realms of Jewish covenantal theology.

A particularly powerful version of this cultural anxiety over the future focuses on the threat of powerful new technologies to destroy human life or the human spirit. However, unlike many of the great classic science fiction tales, such as those from H. G. Wells, the technologies explored in recent English-language film seem to envision, not a radical break with the present, but a reflection on the uncertain implications of technologies we already possess or can imagine on the near horizon. In *Moon* (2009), Sam Bell's two characters are both clones forced to work as slaves on the moon for a large corporation mining a rare isotope of Helium that has become the solution to humanity's energy problem. However, by the end of the film the deceit is discovered and presumably the abusive practice of cloning is put to a stop, thus reasserting our humanity in the face of dehumanizing technologies. In *Gamer* (2009), humanity is threatened by a mind control technology that has been adopted to allow computer game players to control real people as the characters in their gladiator games. In the end, however, the main character is able to kill the mastermind of the plot, thus once again defeating a dehumanizing technology and returning the world to safety and normalcy. The science behind the story is quite unrealistic, but it provides a vehicle for reflection on an internet world of social interaction mediated by fictional avatars little connected to the humans at home in front of their computer and a ubiquitous corporate presence within that world that is increasingly a part of our lives. The film ends with the main character driving off with his wife and daughter, safely back in "our world" that existed before recent and imminent technologies threw humanity of course. The plot of *Surrogates* (2009) is similar, although virtual reality game players control not other human beings, but rather robotic surrogates through which they live their own life in a mechanical body that never ages and is immune from physical harm. At the end of this film as well, the hero destroys the technology that has threatened to enslave and dehumanize us.

At first glance Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air* (2009) follows a somewhat similar model. In this film George Clooney's character, Ryan Bingham, also acts as a "conservative" voice holding onto a threatened way of life when his company tries to adopt internet technologies that would allow a worker to be fired via remote teleconference. Like the characters of *The Book of Eli, The Road,* and *2012,* he is holding onto something of our world that seems threat-

ened, and like the characters of *Moon*, *Gamer,* and *Surrogates,* he is able to do so by defeating a de-humanizing technology and re-asserting the importance of unmediated human contact.

Yet that, of course, is not the real story to be told about *Up in the Air*. When Bingham wins his battle and the hateful technology is defeated, he returns to his lonely, insipid, rootless life, from which we see no possibility of redemption. In many ways Bingham is the embodiment of much of contemporary society; thus, without any doomsday scenarios, this film is more terrifying than any of its apocalyptic siblings from the last couple of years. For according to its vision, the degeneration of the human being that we are facing is not the result of technology gone astray, but of modern *ideas*, and it is already here. We are right to have anxieties about the future, and in particular about the dangers we face from recent and imminent technologies. But if the message of this film is correct, we will not be able to secure a bright future merely by combating the misuse of these technologies or by bravely 'carrying the fire' through the darkness to come. Rather a bright future is possible only if we are able to address the philosophies that are the foundation of Ryan Bingham's alienated life.

Bingham works for a company whose service is to inform employees who are no longer needed by their own organizations that they have been fired, thus sparing the local managers this unpleasant task. Bingham has an acute sense of human psychology and a remarkable knack for saying just the thing to thwart the most emotional and violent responses an employee might have upon learning this news. So, as we learn in the film, Bingham does have a real skill for helping these unfortunate people avoid hurting themselves or others. However, he does so by giving them at least a taste of the sort of detached freedom and self-contained individualism that is the philosophy by which he lives. When Bingham is not busy at work firing people, he sidelines as a motivational speaker giving a talk in which he asks the members of his audience to imagine wearing a backpack filled with everything they own, every relationship to which they are bound by obligation and expectations, and every attachment to which they are tied. He asks the audience to imagine the weight of all these things bearing down on them as the straps of the backpack cut into their shoulders. Finally, he asks them to set their burden down and go out to live a life of complete autonomy, free from all ties. Bingham's life is very much the embodiment of this ideal.[1] He has designed his world so that he spends most of the year on the road, living out of hotels and chasing his dream of ten million frequent flier miles. He has successfully freed himself from any attachment to material things or even to any place, but he has also freed himself from any attachment to human

relationships. His only contact with others seems to include the few minutes he spends with employees severing them from any emotional ties they may have had to the company that has just fired them, the phone calls from his sister that he is unable to avoid, and perhaps the romances he finds on the road.

In Vera Fermiga's character, Alex Goran, Bingham finds his perfect such romance. Goran also spends a good deal of time in hotels across the country and is happy to have a sexual relationship without any emotional attachments. As Bingham and Goran schedule their trysts over the tops of their calendar carrying laptops, they look just as if they are conducting a business deal, and of course in a sense they are. Bingham and Goran each understand their relationship as a type of transaction free from any limitations other than the requirement that each negotiator treat the other as a properly rational agent looking for ways in which a deal will be mutually beneficial according to the interests of both.[2] However, as is expected when the selfish, successful man meets a beautiful woman in a Hollywood film, Bingham falls in love with Goran, and eventually as the film progresses he comes to the formulaic moment of crisis where he decides that it is worth sacrificing his freedom and modifying his self-regulated life to fulfill his passion to be with Goran always. The twist that makes this film refreshingly realistic comes when Bingham discovers Goran is married and has only been enjoying a bit of sexual pleasure and companionship without commitment in the way Bingham has always lived and preached. But this is the only possible honest ending. A life dedicated to autonomy and freedom from ties can no more be mended by a bit of romantic passion than can a culture, and so we are left with this haunting and moving picture of a man trapped in the emptiness and alienation of a life adrift, lacking all meaningful connection to place or to people. Evoking this feeling is very much the conscious intention of Reitman's project. According to the synopsis of the plot on the film's official website, "Ryan [Bingham] has long been contented with his unencumbered lifestyle lived out across America in airports, hotels, and rental cars. He can carry all he needs in one wheel-away case; he is a pampered elite member of every travel loyalty program in existence — and yet… Ryan has nothing to hold onto."[3] He is a man "with an unrecognized emptiness behind his confident swagger and supposed joy at being 'baggage-free.'"[4] This official interpretation of the film goes on to say, Bingham's story is

> about a man who is instantly, poignantly recognizable — a charming, decent man who has enthusiastically embraced our world of speed, technology, comfort, individual am-

> bition and material perks; a man who leads a smooth, enjoyable life; a man who has it all and yet, finds something vital is missing. His tale raises intriguing questions: in an age of global travel and machine-mediated conversations, how do we get to the real, lasting connections that once sustained American communities? And what happens when we avoid them? [5]

This recognition of a general malaise in the modern world, particularly as linked to the loss of relation to place and other human beings, is captured in a particularly powerful way in *Up in the Air*, but it is clearly a prevalent theme in many areas of contemporary culture. James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009) is also a reflection on a western, modern people living a life of alienation. However, his vision goes beyond the powerful descriptions of the symptoms of alienation we see in *Up in the Air*, to an attempt to account for their cause. In *Avatar*, it appears that the malaise of contemporary America is due to a spiritual disconnect from the sacredness of the world. The foil to the American worldview, that of the Na'vi, offer us a vision in which the alienations of contemporary life do no hold. The life of an individual Na'vi is interwoven with that of others in a rich communal life bound together by sacred ritual and rooted in place through a deep recognition of her connection to the sacredness of the natural world. This provides a stark contrast to the isolated and disconnected life of Ryan Bingham. The power of film brings this contrast to life in a visually intoxicating flood of images as we compare the cold, hard, clean lines of Bingham's nightly hotels, loyalty cards, and individually packaged food containers to the warm, soft, lush world full of green in which Jake and Neytiri and their tribe hunt, ride, and love.

These differences in the style of a life portrayed in the comparison between *Avatar* and *Up in the Air* are much more fundamental than some accidental variation that could be accounted for by either something like genetic drift or the trappings of idiosyncratic artistic genius (depending on which of C. P. Snow's two camps you prefer as a source of metaphor). Rather, they are manifestations of a clash between the deepest values that form the very essence of a society's form of life. Bingham's world is rooted in a philosophy that values unfettered autonomy of will over all else. In contrast the life of the Na'vi is rooted in a community interwoven with certain traditional and hierarchical structures. This is particularly true in the areas of their life most relevant to our inquiry, namely the experience of the sacred. Na'vi spirituality is governed by ritual and taboo, but these can never be reduced to a set of rigid

laws to be followed mechanically. Rather, they are expressions of a collective wisdom that governs various ways of interacting with society and nature that is passed on from one generation to the next in a living tradition. We see this clearly in the ways Neytiri teaches Jake about hunting. At one point Jake complains, "it's been a month and I'm still not allowed to make a kill. She [Neytiri] says the forest hasn't given permission."[6] Neytiri is not helping Jake memorize a set of rules to maximize sustainable use of a resource of the kind enforced by a nation's Department of Fish and Game; she is introducing him into a traditional way of life. In setting her this task, Neytiri's mother tells her, "daughter, you will teach him our way, to speak and walk as we do."[7] Cameron could not be more explicit in linking Jake's growing awareness of the sacred to the wisdom embodied in a traditional way of life. This example also reveals the close connection between tradition and interwoven structures of hierarchy for the Na'vi. It is only by accepting the authority of Neytiri and following her instruction that Jake is able to be initiated into the traditions of her people. Further, Neytiri herself is acting under the authority of her mother Mo'at, the great spiritual leader, or "*Tsahik* — the one who interprets the will of *Eywa*."[8] Our first introduction to Mo'at comes when Jake has just been brought before the tribe's chieftain, Eytukan, and there is great general commotion. But, according to Cameron's script, "they all FREEZE as — A commanding FEMALE VOICE echoes through the chamber." In Na'vi, Mo'at says "*Step back!... I will look at this alien,*" and "there is an expectant hush as Mo'at descends."[9] Clearly, as the commotion gives way to quiet and calm from on high, we are meant to recognize Mo'at's authority. This is strengthened later in the scene when Mo'at decides, against the wishes of many, including her daughter, that Jake will be spared and even taught the ways of the Na'vi by Neytiri. However, her authority is not primarily political. She is a spiritual leader, and Neytiri is referred to several times as assisting her in the role of "acolyte."[10] Her authority is integral to and indeed deeply integrated with the tradition that makes possible her people's experience of the sacred.

Cameron's vision has been incredibly appealing. World-wide *Avatar* is the highest grossing film of all time.[11] Of course each ticket was more expensive than for films of the past. Differences in ticket pricing make international numbers for ticket sales very difficult to ascertain. However, even according to conservative estimates, within the U.S. the film ranks within the top 30 in terms of numbers of viewers, and more tickets were sold for *Avatar* than for any film since *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* in 1999.[12] The film's detractors, such as Russell Moore, Dean of the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, claim that

the record breaking numbers for the film merely reflect curiosity about the new 3-D technology employed.[13] However, this ignores the powerful emotional draw the film seems to elicit for many people. The *Wall Street Journal* ran an article earlier last year suggesting that part of the film's great economic success is due to the great beauty and complexity of Pandora that draws viewers back to see the film for repeat viewings despite the high ticket prices.[14] But, I would suggest that it is more than just the beauty of Pandora that gives *Avatar* such emotional power. Surely, people are drawn to a movie on this scale for diverse reasons, but it is plausible that for many, it is the spiritual connection of the Na'vi to the sacredness of their world that makes the film so poignant. In an article in *CNN Entertainment*, titled "Audiences Experience 'Avatar' Blues," Joe Piazza describes a web forum entitled, "Ways to cope with the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible." Less than a month after the release of the film, the thread already had over 1000 posts from people dealing with feelings of depression and even suicidal thoughts after leaving the theater. The comments on this site make it clear that it is not only the beauty of a fantasy world, but more powerfully the way that the life of the Na'vi connects to that beauty, that so enthralls these viewers. One contributor quoted by Piazza writes, "it's so hard — I can't force myself to think that it's just a movie, and to get over it, that living like the Na'vi will never happen."[15] However, if *Avatar* is successful in inspiring a deep yearning for an experience of the sacredness of the world and perhaps pointing to the connection between this experience and the importance of tradition, it does not sate this hunger. It would be unreasonable to expect a two and a half hour film to do so, but perhaps *Avatar* does more than merely arouse a desire in its audience that it cannot fulfill. By setting the struggle on Pandora so clearly within the context of the American lead wars of western Europe against Iraq and Afghanistan, Cameron points to the possibility of looking to Islam to find a real people who might provide a more sustained and richer inspiration in the quest for the sacred as an alternative to the modern, western alienation encountered so often in recent cinema.

I suggest that we take up Cameron's hint and look to see if perhaps the hunger in the West for a recovery of the sacredness of the world can, indeed, find resources in the traditions of Islam. In the 12th century the encounter with Islamic philosophy and theology helped to sparked a great revival in the West, and perhaps it can help in at least some small way to do so again. This is a project that has been underway for a hundred years through the pioneering work of early students in the renewed encounter with Islam such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, but it is a conversation that is only beginning to take off in main-

stream academic circles. As a part of that emerging conversation, I suggest we look to Hossein Nasr and his argument for *why* being a part of a tradition is such a powerful path for coming to see the sacredness of the world, for it is this claim that speaks directly to both the alienation so hauntingly portrayed in *Up in the Air* and the spiritual hungers that are revealed in our love for the people of Pandora and their connection to the Tree of Souls.

The first thing to note about Nasr's claim that in contact with Islam the modern west has great potential resources for recovering the importance of tradition is that, in his view, we will not find these riches among the contemporary counterparts to the Na'vi armies. He claims that a commitment to tradition has been abandoned as much by what we, in the West, often call fundamentalist Islam as by modern secularism. For him these "fundamentalist" philosophies fail precisely because they believe that the entire truth of a religion can be encapsulated in its founding documents. A tradition, on the other hand, requires being handed down from generation to generation and spread from place to place by living persons and in ways that adapt to changing circumstances and different cultures under the continuing guidance of divine wisdom. Nasr believes this notion of traditional religion is under great threat within Islamic countries. He goes so far as to claim that "politically speaking all the governments in the Islamic world today, even those that possess a traditional structure, are controlled by either the modernists or by so-called fundamentalists."[16]

In Nasr's view a great deal of these "fundamentalist" tendencies, which have captured our attention with their violent resistance to the west and that are so hostile to a living and growing Islamic tradition, can be traced to a line of influence that begins in the alliance between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and the house of Sa'ud in the 18th century, goes on to inspire Sayyid Qutb's version of the Muslim Brotherhood in the mid 20th century, and then radiates out to the various members of the Mujahedeen and al-Qaeda through Wahhabist schools and mosques financed by Saudi Arabian oil over the last 50 years.[17]

This is not the place to evaluate Nasr's claim,[18] but it is worth a brief look at Qutb and Wahhab, regardless of our ultimate judgment about their place in the history of Islamic thought, as examples of what Nasr sees as paradigmatic of anti-traditional thinkers that have been so destructive of the nobler aspects of Islam. Wahhab and Qutb are among the few leaders in the history of Islam to call for *jihad* against their fellow Muslims, for they both believed that Islamic culture in many places had been irredeemably corrupted by innovation. For these two, strict observance of the Qur'an (as dictated to Muhammad by the angel of

God) and the Hadith of al-Salaf as-Saleh (the divinely inspired sayings and doings of Muhammad written by the first three generations of his followers) alone are all that is needed to guide a person's life. Thus, they reject any teachings not found in these texts as *bid'ah*, or innovation. This means that the processes of tradition or the handing down of truth from one generation to the next and the ongoing revelation of the divine through the natural world must both be rejected as the source of innovation and distortion of a message that is already fully contained in the text of the original sayings. From this it follows for both Wahhab and Qutb that good Muslims must submit to no human judgment or authority, for their behavior and belief must be guided only by their religious texts. As Qutb writes in his most influential work, *Milestones*, "it is first necessary that a Muslim community come into existence which believes that 'There is no deity except God,' which commits itself to obey none but God, denying all other authority"[19] and again:

> When, in a society, the sovereignty belongs to God alone, expressed in its obedience to the Divine Law, only then is every person in that society free from servitude to others, and only then does he taste true freedom. This alone is "human civilization," as the basis of a human civilization is the complete and true freedom of every person and the full dignity of every individual of the society. On the other hand, in a society in which some people are lords who legislate and some others are slaves who obey them, then there is no freedom in the real sense, nor dignity for each and every individual.[20]

Thus, it would seem that Western modernity and Qutb's fundamentalist Islam that battles with it are both rooted in a common rejection of tradition and the authority of traditional leaders. It is for this reason that Nasr claims, "in many ways, Islamic 'fundamentalism' and modernism are two sides of the same coin."[21] If he is right, the philosophy behind the military resistance to American forces of "shock and awe," which in the real world of Afghanistan correspond to the fictional Na'vi, will not provide the in-depth dialogue partner for building a cultural encounter with the sacred that Cameron invokes in *Avatar* and for which his fans yearn. The hope for inspiration from the Muslim world for overcoming alienation and the loss of the sacred in the modern west looks even more doubtful if Nasr is correct that "politically speaking all the governments in the Islamic world today, even those that possess a traditional structure, are controlled by either the modernists or by so-called fundamentalists."[22]

However, Nasr argues that there is a third strand to Islam that is on the defensive and is not represented officially in any current political state, but is nonetheless still a living influence within the Muslim world. This strand he calls traditional Islam, and he explicitly argues that *this* strand of Islam can, indeed, be a model for the recovery of the sacred in the West and thereby a recovery of our relationships to other people and to the world. In fact Nasr opens his Gifford Lectures from 1980 claiming that his aim is to aid "in the resuscitation of the sacred quality of knowledge and the revival of the veritable intellectual tradition of the West with the aid of the still living traditions of the Orient where knowledge has never become divorced from the sacred."[23]

Nasr's argument can be summarized by three basic trajectories. (1) When human beings take the material world to be a self-contained reality to be known in-itself and thus lose their understanding of the world as sacred creation to be understood fully only in the light of the divine, then they become lost in a market place without true sustained relationships to other people or the world. (2) The sacredness of the world is revealed through the light of a sacred knowledge rooted in tradition. (3) This understanding of a sacred knowing is threatened in the Muslim world but is still alive, and therefore it may be a model for a western culture in which this sacred knowledge, and thus sustained connection to the sacred, has been lost.

Nasr's first trajectory, his argument for the causal relation between the abandonment of the sacred and the experience of alienation, relies on the claim that when we, as human beings, refuse to acknowledge the dependence of creation on a higher divine reality, we refuse our role as "pontifical man" or bridge between earth and heaven and become "Promethean man" in an attempt to define our human world as the ultimate reality. Paradoxically, this does not raise the world that is now to be valued for its own sake and not merely as a reflection of something else; rather, it strips the world of meaning and severs our relations to it and to one another. "Such a man [the Promethean] envisages life as a big marketplace in which he is free to roam around and choose objects at will. Having lost the sense of the sacred, he is drowned in transience and impermanence."[24] A careful analysis of Nasr's argument lies beyond the scope of this article, but the general alignment between his position and the themes of *Up in the Air* and *Avatar* should already be beginning to appear. But the key to Nasr's relevance for our discussion is his account of *why* an encounter with the sacred that would overcome our alienation must be rooted in a tradition, a theme that is only hinted at in *Avatar*.

In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr gives three main reasons for the importance of tradition. First, the exegesis of scripture within a traditional framework reveals that discovery of the divine is not primarily achieved in thinking or reading about God or God's revelation as if we were learning some external fact; rather, traditional exegesis reveals that every act of knowing involves an inner illumination by which the human mind participates in the divine intellect. Second, tradition, as the handing down of divine truth, places this personal experience of divine intellect within the context of historical and interpersonal relations. In other words, tradition reveals the worldly aspect of inner illumination. Third, according to Nasr, it is within the bounds of tradition that the things of the physical world can be seen in the most universal and richest possible way as manifestations of the divine nature.

Nasr's first argument emerges from a reflection on the conditions necessary for an encounter with the sacred among practitioners of a scriptural religion, but opens onto a hermeneutics of the sacred that embraces all acts of knowing. He writes, "without reviving spiritual exegesis, it is not possible to rediscover *scientia sacra* in the bosom of a tradition dominated by the presence of sacred scripture. Scripture possesses an inner dimension which is attainable only through intellection operating within a traditional framework."[25] Nasr's insistence on the importance of understanding a holy text in the context of tradition is designed to resist the temptation to reduce divine revelation to an external relation on two fronts. On the one hand, a radically fundamentalist interpretation of scripture reduces a text to an already constituted totality to which one merely conforms by the outward observances of correct belief, ritual, and conduct. On the other, a radical historical-critical method reduces the text to a set of social and moral commentaries that reveal only the conditions of the time and place in which it emerged. Again, the text becomes a merely external object that one appropriates. Against these two tendencies, a properly hermeneutical tradition reminds us that a holy text speaks directly to the inner spirit of a listener by a divine act of illumination of the intellect. Thus, the meaning of the text cannot be thought about, even as a limit idea, as external to the reader. Meaning always merges from the relation between knower and text. For Nasr this is not only the model that maintains the tie between scriptural exegesis and the sacred, but the model for all knowing able to recognize the sacredness of its object. According to Nasr, in each act of intellection, the mind is illuminated by the rays of divine intellect.

> Spiritual hermeneutics is the means whereby the intelligence, sanctified by revelation, is able to penetrate into the heart of revelation to discover the principial truth that is the very root and substance of intelligence itself. In this process the microcosmic manifestation of the Intellect, which is the source of inner illumination and intellection, unveils the inner meaning of that macrocosmic manifestation of the Intellect which is revelation or more specifically, sacred scripture. Moreover, the same truth pertains *mutis mutandis* to the interpretation of the inner meaning of that other revealed book which is the cosmos itself.[26]

Thus in protecting the truths of sacred scripture from being reduced to external facts by either fundamentalism or historicism, tradition, the handing down of spiritual and pastoral hermeneutic wisdom, provides the model that protects knowledge of the natural world from being reduced to a positivism that posits truth as a self-contained reality within the material thing, to which the human remains external, or a constructivism that posits truth as merely the beliefs of a certain people or the expression of the social and economic conditions of a particular historical situation, to which the nature of the thing itself remains external. Rather, in all instances of knowing, whether the discovery of the relations in the Pythagorean theorem or the optimal foraging strategy of bees, the knower and the objects of knowledge are held together in an internal relationship interwoven by the light of the divine intellect that orders all things. Thus, for Nasr, the act of knowing binds the nature of the mind to nature of the thing as both are elevated towards the divine.

Second, while Nasr believes that participation in a tradition can help avoid the reduction of all acts of knowing to individual empirical and psychological facts, thus preserving the transcendent or metaphysical aspects of knowing, he also believes that it has the ability to avoid the philosophical temptation toward a "vulgar" Platonism that sees truth as requiring a disregard of the sensuous and particular. This philosophical temptation is perhaps most acute in times of religious pluralism and can emerge from the very attempt at intercultural and inter-religious dialogue that both Nasr and I want to promote. He writes that this attempt,

> has lead certain scholars and philosophers engaged in "comparative philosophy" in the context of East and West to speak of "meta-philosophy" and a meta-language which

> stands above and beyond the language of a particular tradition. *From the traditional point of view, however*, the language of metaphysics is inseparable from the content and meaning it expresses and bears the imprint of the message, this language having been developed by the metaphysicians and sages of various traditions over the ages.[27]

So, tradition, the handing down of wisdom from one generation to the next, ties us to an origin, a founding event in which the divine reality is revealed in a unique way. But it also preserves a certain historical and worldly "thickness" in which that revelation is constantly renewed through a specific temporally and geographically embedded community. As Nasr argues, "tradition extends the presence of the sacred into a whole world, creating a civilization in which the sense of the sacred is ubiquitous. The function of a traditional civilization may be said to be nothing other than creating a world dominated by the sacred."[28]

Finally, for Nasr, tradition is most specifically tied to the sacredness of the world in the way it reveals the symbolic nature of sensuous reality. Nasr writes, "since *scientia sacra* is expressed outwardly and does not remain only on the level of the inner illumination of the heart, it is necessary to understand something of the kind of language it employs. The formal language used for the expression of *scientia sacra*, and in fact nearly the whole spectrum of traditional teachings, is that of symbolism."[29] We have just seen that tradition plays an important role, in a general way, for Nasr in protecting his neo-platonic illuminationism from collapsing into a private psychological experience. Now, with regard to the symbolism of things, tradition plays a more specific role. The final goal, for Nasr, is to move beyond the recognition that knowing things is a participation in the divine intellect, to seeing things as immediate manifestations of the divine reality in symbolic form.[30] This recognition is not an automatic part of the human condition. On the contrary, we have deep tendencies, enshrined in the deepest levels of our thinking and manifest already at the very level of grammar, to see things as self-contained, discreet objects bearing properties as if those properties were their own independent possessions. And yet some things appear with such richness and as so pregnant with meaningful connections that they over-power our objectivist tendencies and draw us toward seeing these things as manifestations of divine power and grace. For examples of these natural and universal symbols we might think of the sun, the morning star, a kiss, a storm, a glass of red wine and all the poetic descriptions these things call forth from us. However, according to Nasr, outside of tradition this way of encountering things

tends to be both rare and rather inchoate. Through initiation into tradition this way of encountering the world can be broadened and deepened as certain sensuous things become privileged within the liturgical life of a particular people and thus points of orientation and exemplars for the encounter with the rest of the sensuous world. As he explains,

> There are, moreover, symbols which are "natural" in the sense of being inherent in the nature of certain objects and forms through the very cosmogonic process which has brought forth these forms upon the terrestrial plane. There are other symbols which are sanctified by a particular revelation that is like a second creation. The sun is "naturally" the symbol of the Divine Intellect for anyone who still possesses the faculty of symbolic perception and in whom the "symbolist spirit" is operative. But the same sun is sanctified in a special manner in solar cults such as Mithraism and gains a special significance in a particular traditional universe as has wine in Christianity or water in Islam. The Sufi poets may use the symbolism of wine in the first sense of symbol but it is the Christic descent which has given that special significance to wine in the Eucharist as a sanctified symbol that remains bound to the particular world which is Christian. *Scientia sacra* makes use of both types of symbolism in the exposition of its teachings but is always rooted in its formal aspect in the tradition in which it flowers and functions and by virtue of which the very attainment of this sacred knowledge is possible in an operative manner.[31]

Thus, in Nasr's view, it is the specificity of a particular tradition that trains us to see particular ordinary things around us as symbols that elevate us to the divine, and gradually we are lead to see all of reality as full of sacred and particular natures drawing us towards the eternal.

As we contemplate our prospects for the future in the light of the disconnected and lonely wasteland revealed in *Up in the Air* and the deep spiritual hunger revealed in *Avatar*, it seems clear that our task is almost inestimably more challenging and graver than merely standing firm against dangerous new technologies and somehow finding the courage to build an arc that will gather up what we have and hold onto it through the dark time to come. Rather, we must confront the very ideas that undergird our contemporary culture and find a way to rekindle a thriving spiritual way of life that recognizes the sacredness of a

world. Nasr makes a strong case that integral to this life immersed in the sacred must be a thriving tradition of spiritual interpretation at the heart of all knowing. It remains to be seen in what ways and to what degree his vision of Islam in which "the very substance and existence of everything is ultimately the Breath of God in God's aspect of compassion and mercy"[32] will be successful in inspiring renewal within the broader cultural life of the west. But I believe it is a conversation well worth having.

---

1. There is a strange tendency within a capitalist logic, already noticed by Marx in "The Meaning of Human Requirements," to valorize a seemingly strange combination of frantic consumption and monk-like asceticism. But while the monk embraces the rigours and detachment of the ascetic life for the purpose of achieving nirvana in the union with Being or the fulfillment of desire in the union with the divine, Bingham's has no point other than the purely abstract and hauntingly meaningless goal of collecting frequent flier miles that he has no intention of using to actually get anywhere.

2. See also Alain Badiou, "Bodies, Languages, Truths" (lecture delivered at Victoria College of Arts, 9 Sept.), http:// www.lacan.com/badbodies.htm, in which he diagnoses modern alienation with the term "democratic materialism" and argues that detachment from obligations in one's sexual life is the paradigmatic modern freedom. "For democratic materialism, truth is clearly definable as the (negative) rule of what there is. One is free if no language comes to prohibit to individual bodies to deploy their own capacities. Or again: languages let bodies actualize their vital possibilities. This is why, in democratic materialism, sexual freedom is the paradigm of every freedom. It is in effect clearly placed at the point of articulation of desires (bodies) and linguistic, prohibitive or stimulating legislations. The individual must see recognized its right to 'live his or her sexuality.' The other freedoms will necessarily follow. And it is true that they follow, if we understand every freedom from the point of view of the model it adopts with regard to sex: the non-prohibition of the uses that an individual can make, in private, of the body that inscribes it in the world. It is nevertheless the case that, in materialist dialectics, in which freedom is defined in an entirely different manner, this paradigm is no longer tenable. It is not a matter in effect of the bond — of prohibition, tolerance or validation — that languages entertain with the virtuality of bodies. It is a matter of knowing if and how a body partakes, through languages, in the exception of a truth. We can put it as follows: being free is not of the order of relation between bodies and languages, but, directly, of incorporation (to a truth)."

3. "Production Notes: About the Film," *Up in the Air: Official Movie Site*, accessed 15 Jul. 2011, http://www.theupin theairmovie. com/up-in-the-air-film#/aboutTheFilm/productionNotes.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. James Cameron, *Avatar*, 65, accessed 1 Jun. 2011. http://web.archive.org/web/20100525105437/http://www.foxscreenings.com/media/pdf/JamesCameronAVATAR.pdf.

7. Ibid., 47.

8. Ibid., 46.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 46, 80, 122.

11. "All Time Box Office," *Box Office Mojo*, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/.

12. Ray Subers, "*Avatar* Strikes DVD," *Box Office Mojo*, 21 Apr. 2010, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/? id=2728&p=.htm.

13. Russell D. Moore, "Avatar: Rambo in Reverse," *The Christian Post*, 21 Dec. 2009, accessed 10 July 2011, http:// www.christianpost.com/article/20091221/avatar-rambo-in-reverse/index.html.

14. "As 'Avatar' Sets Box-Office Record, Fans Make Return Trips to Pandora," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 Jan. 2010, accessed 10 Jul. 2011, http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/01/26/as-avatar-sets-box-office-record-fans-make-return-trips-to-pandora/.

15. Jo Piazza, "Audience Experiences 'Avatar' Blues," 11 Jan. 2010, accessed 10 Jul. 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-01-11/entertainment/avatar.movie.blues_1_pandora-depressed-posts?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ.

16. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam at the Dawn of the New Christian Millennium," http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr00/01.htm.

17. See, e.g., Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2002), 69-70; Samuel Helfont, *The Sunni Divide: Understanding Politics and Terrorism in the Arab Middle East* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2009), 21, accessed 10 July 2011, http://www.fpri.org/pubs/Helfont.SunniDivide.pdf.

18. The literature on the topic is vast, but for examples of support for Nasr's argument for a corruption of Islamic traditionalism along the Wahhab-Qutb axis see Tamera Albertini, "The Seductiveness of Certainty: The Destruction of Islam's Intellectual Legacy by the Fundamentalists," *Philosophy East and West* 53.4 (2003): 455-70. See also Helfont, *The Sunni Divide*, 21. For an opposing view, see Pope Benedict XVI's controversial Regensburg Address, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," 12 Sept. 2006, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html, in which he cites scholars who situate the extreme anti-rationalism and anti-traditionalism that mar today's fundamentalists as early as Ibn Hazm, writing just before Al Ghazali in the early 11th century. Sanford Lakoff argues that at least some of these problems exist already in the Qur'an itself, in "The Reality of Muslim Exceptionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 15.4 (2004): 133-39.

19. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones,* 15, http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/MILESTONES.pdf.

20. Ibid., 50.

21. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World,* 428.

22. Nasr, "Islam at the Dawn of the New Christian Millennium."

23. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1.

24. Ibid., 72.

25. Ibid., 68.

26. Ibid., 69.

27. Ibid., 59.

28. Ibid., 36.

29. Ibid., 70.

30. In the Christian tradition, this would be called "sacramental" form. For a sample of recent work on the philosophical significance of this sacramental theology and its relation to the notion of symbol, particularly in engagement with many of the same philosophical sources in Platonism and phenomenology that inspire Nasr, see Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994); Michael G. Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996); and Felix O'Murchadha, *A Phenomenology of Christian Life: Glory and Night* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

31. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 70.

32 Nasr, *The Garden of Truth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 44.