

Up in the Air: Our hopes for the future and our grounding in the Sacred.

A work in progress...

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Abstract

There seem to be an unusual number of films from the last year that depict a troubling time for humanity in the very near future. Despite their differences, these films seem to share two intertwining themes. Often the protagonists are portrayed as heroically holding onto our cultural values in the face of grave threats or securing the world we know against de-humanizing technologies. *Up in the Air* shares a superficial resemblance to these films in that the protagonist defeats a technology that threatens human relations and in doing so holds onto human values. However, unlike other similar plots, the 'normal' world of our contemporary culture, to which its main character returns, is revealed as a lonely, meaningless life detached from real relationships to humans or the world. Thus, it projects a much more haunting picture of the future. According to this vision, the horrors of a dehumanized life are not the result of a societal breakdown or dangerous technologies. These horrors are the result of modern ideas, and they are already here. In this paper I start with the assumption that *Up in the Air* offers us a troubling picture of much of contemporary American culture in which relationships are conducted as business deals and no place is home. I then explore the claim of the Persian-American philosopher Hossein Nasr that this breakdown in connection to others and to place is the result of the loss of the recognition of the sacredness of the world, which is rooted in the rejection of tradition and authority. He argues that secular and fundamentalist Islam have both accepted this Enlightenment error, but that what remains of traditional Islam offers us a model to both the East and the West for the recovery of the sacred by revealing the importance of tradition. For Nasr, this grounding of the sacred in tradition is important for three reasons. First, the exegesis of scripture within a traditional framework 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 a historical and geographical context, thus revealing the worldly aspect of inner illumination. Third, only within the bounds of tradition can the things of the physical world truly reveal their nature as transcendent symbols pointing beyond themselves toward the divine. Thus, his work suggests that a hopeful future for humanity may only be secured by recovering our sense of the sacredness of the world as revealed in a flourishing spiritual tradition.

Up in the Air: Our hopes for the future and our grounding in the Sacred.

As the theme of this conference highlights, many recent films depict considerable anxiety over the future, and this phenomenon seems to reveal a widespread cultural worry that our very humanity is in danger from serious threats that are soon to break upon us. Unlike in times past, many of the science fiction films of the past year are set, not in the distant future, but only several years hence. In many of these films recent and imminent technologies are responsible for the danger to our humanity. But perhaps most significantly, almost all of these films are deeply conservative, in that they share the conviction we must hold onto our culture in the face of the coming danger. There are clearly many interesting philosophical themes and different views of the future in each of these films, but here I want to briefly note only these two aspects. We see the elucidation of the dangers of recent and imminent technologies most clearly portrayed in *Moon*, *Gamer*, and *Surrogates* and the theme of holding onto our human culture most clearly in *The Road*, *The Book of Eli*, and *2012*. However, both themes are generally intertwined.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, 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 his son 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 turn human beings into nothing more than animals. In the *Book of Eli*, Denzel Washington's character, Eli, 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 has created a library and is nurturing the collective wisdom of humanity through the disordered times into which the west has fallen. *2012* is the only of these films in which technology is clearly not the threat, but it is also the film that most clearly illustrates the imperative of holding onto what we have of our culture in the dangerous times to come. In fact human beings re-create the biblical story of the Flood by creating three large 'arcs' that will preserve human life through the coming storm.

In *Moon*, Sam Bell's two characters are both clones forced to work as slaves 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* 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, Gerard Butler's character is able to kill the mastermind of the plot in whose brain resides the mind controlling artificial neurons, thus once again defeating the dehumanizing technology and returning the world to safety and normalcy. The film ends with the main character driving off with his wife and daughter, safely back in "our world" that existed before coming technologies threw humanity of course. The plot of *Surrogates* 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* follows a somewhat similar model. In this film George Clooney's character, Ryan Bingham, also acts as a conservative voice holding onto 'old-fashioned' values 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 threatened, and like the characters of *Moon*, *Gamer*, and *Surrogates* he is able to save humanity from this ill-defined but imminent peril to our very nature by defeating a de-humanizing technology and re-asserting the importance of unmediated.

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 post-apocalyptic siblings from the last year. For according to its vision the degeneration of the human being that we are facing is the result, not of

technology gone astray, but of modern *ideas*, and it is already here. I think 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, and I argue that it is, 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 have led to Ryan Bingham's life.

Bingham works for a company whose third party service is to inform employees, who are no longer needed by their company, that they have been fired, thus sparing management this unpleasant task. He has an acute sense of human psychology and a remarkable knack for saying just the thing to thwart the most emotional 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 detachment and self-contained individualism that is the philosophy by which he lives. When Bingham is not busy at work he sidelines as a motivational speaker giving a talk during which he asks 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 and then to imagine burning the backpack and going out to live a life of complete autonomy, free from all ties. Bingham's life is very much the embodiment of this ideal. He has designed his life 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. So 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 personal contacts seem 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 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 this is the business model, in which each negotiator treats the other as a properly rational agent looking for ways in which a deal will be mutually beneficial, that guides both of their lives. As is expected when the selfish, successful man meets a beautiful woman in a Hollywood film, Bingham falls in love with Goran and decides it is worth sacrificing his freedom and modifying his self-regulated life to fulfill his passion to be with her 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 who has recognized the emptiness of a life lived adrift, lacking all meaningful connection to place or to people. Evoking this feeling is very much the conscious intention of the story. According to Jason Reitman, director and co-author of the screenplay, 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 ambition 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?

This recognition of a general malaise in American culture, 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 contemporary culture. As we look for possibilities to restore the relations that are so often lacking in our culture, we are quite naturally drawn to other models from cultures around the world. Perhaps no peoples on earth have been as adamant in their refusal of the American model than those peoples that adhere to radical Islam. So it is no surprise that a filmmaker like James Cameron, self consciously searching for a remedy to the individualism, loss of rootedness in place, and relation to community so prevalent in our contemporary world, would model his story *Avatar* on the American lead wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Further Cameron's claim that community and relation to place are rooted in a recognition of the sacredness of the world that is missing in the West seems compelling, and I

will develop the philosophical reasons for this claim below. However, his attempt at deriving the sacredness of the world from the metaphysics of the Na'vi fails, in my opinion. Others at this conference will look at the Na'vi directly. I want to look at the real peoples that are the model for Cameron's fictional resistance to western materialism and individualism.

In many ways radical Islam seems a promising place to look for alternatives to the west that will perhaps give us a model for thinking an alternate future to the one laid out for us in *Up in the Air*. After all, it appears at first glance that they are the peoples of all the earth who have most fiercely rejected western values. To get to the heart of the complex beliefs that motivate the Muslim peoples of the Near East, South Asia and their diaspora would require a monumental look at the ways in which Greek philosophy was brought into contact with Islamic tradition in different ways by the great medieval thinkers al-Farabi, Avicenna (ibn Sina), al-Ghazali, and Averroes (ibn Rushd). I do not have the have the expertise or the space to do so. However, it seems fairly uncontroversial that the political movements of radical Islam that inspire the fiercest resistance to western values, the movement within Islam that has universally captured our attention in the West with its terrorist attacks, can be traced back to the much simpler line running from the alliance between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and the house of Sa'ud in the 18th century and merging with Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood to then radiate out to the various members of the Mujahedeen and al-Qaeda through Wahhabi schools and mosques financed by Saudi Arabian oil.¹ Qutb and Wahhab are among the few leaders in the history of Islam to call for *jihad* on other Muslims, for they both believed that Islamic culture 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 Haddith (the divinely inspired sayings and doings of Muhammad and his followers written soon after his death) 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 must be rejected as the source of innovation and distortion of a message that is already fully contained in the text. From this it follows for both Wahhab and Qutb that good Muslims must submit to no human

¹ See for example, Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, p. 69-70; Helfont. *Sunni Divide*, p. 21

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"² 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.³

Thus, radical or fundamentalist Islam and western Modernity are based on the same root rejection of authority and tradition. If Hossein Nasr is correct that the malaise of the west is due to a loss of the sacred which springs from a rejection of tradition and authority, it would seem that turning to Islam as a model for thinking the rejuvenation of the west is doomed to fail. This would seem even more certainly the case if Nasr is also right that the only two types of Islamic states in the contemporary world are fundamentalist states like Iran and Saudi Arabia and secular states such as Turkey which are rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of the west. However, Nasr argues that there is a third strand to Islam that is on the defensive and is not represented in any political state, but is nonetheless 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 for the Orient where knowledge has never become divorced from the sacred."⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr is an American-trained philosopher who rose to prominence in Iran in the 1970s. He was forced to emigrate after the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and now teaches at George Washington University. He considers himself a teacher in the Persian

² Qutb, *Milestones*, p. 15.

³ Qutb, *Milestones*, p. 50.

⁴ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* [henceforth KS], p. 1.

traditions of Shi'ite and Sufi Islam and is considered one of the world's leading Islamic scholars. In the rest of this paper I will look at the expanded text of his Gifford Lectures, published as *Knowledge and the Sacred*, to uncover his claim that the West can indeed find inspiration in traditional Islam for overcoming the lonely rootlessness portrayed so vividly in *Up in the Air*.

Nasr's argument can be summarized by three basic trajectories. (1) When human beings take the world to be the totality of reality, when they lose the understanding of the world as sacred creation deriving its value from a higher reality on the divine plane, then they become lost in a market place without true 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 and authority. (3) This understanding of a sacred knowing, rooted in tradition and authority, is threatened in Islamic culture but is still alive and is thus a model for a western culture in which it is almost dead.

An analysis of the third trajectory is beyond the scope of this paper, but my aim is to take up to some small degree Nasr's invitation to a dialogue. The first trajectory is also beyond the scope of this paper, and I cannot attempt to retrace the arguments by which Nasr attempts to establish his position. But in brief, his claim is that when human beings refuse to acknowledge the dependence of creation on a higher, more real divine plane we refuse our role as "pontifical man" or bridge between earth and heaven and become "Promethean man" in an attempt to define our world as ultimate reality and our true home. 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 [Promethean man] 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..."⁵ In place of arguments to defend this claim I can, here, only offer the illustrations provided by *Up in the Air* and *Avatar*. In Anthony Lane's review of *Up in the Air* for *The New Yorker*, aptly titled "Nowhere Man," he closes with a comment on a quote from Bingham "'we are here to make limbo bearable' [Bingham] says of his profession,

⁵ *KS*, p. 72.

though his is a genuine purgatory.”⁶ In a world where we are no longer bound to others or to place, we turn our home into a misery that lacks even the permanence of hell. In the modern world we are left, up in the air.

In diagnosing the root of this malaise as the loss of the sacred, Nasr has the unlikely support of James Cameron. However, in rooting the sacred firmly in the context of tradition and authority, Nasr belies the claims of Cameron’s vague orientalism.⁷ Although tradition and authority are both important for Nasr, the value of authority is derived from its role in supporting tradition, for it is tradition that allows for the revelation of the sacred. In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr seems to give 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, 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 a historical and interpersonal relations. In other words tradition reveals the worldly aspect of inner illumination. Third, only within the bounds of tradition can the things of the physical world truly reveal their nature as transcendent symbols pointing beyond themselves toward the divine.

Nasr recognizes that his first claim for the importance of tradition is limited to systems of belief rooted in a founding text. 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

⁶ Lane, “Nowhere Man.” *New Yorker*, Sept 26, 2010.

⁷ In regard to this sort of weak orientalism, Nasr says the following: “As for traditional symbols, since they have their root in the archetypal world of the Spirit, it is possible to have them resuscitated provided there is a living tradition which can absorb symbols, images, and even doctrines of another traditional world, this absorption implying much more than mere historical borrowing. In any case, symbols and ideas of nonliving or alien traditions cannot be legitimately adopted or absorbed into another world which is not itself traditional, as so many attempt to do in the modern world. He who attempts to carry out such a process independent of tradition is doing nothing less than usurping the function of a prophet or the figure whom the Muslims call the Mahdī and the Hindus the Chakravartin. The adoption of any element from another tradition must follow the laws and principles which determine the mode of existence of the tradition which is adopting the elements in question. Otherwise, the adoption of elements of an even originally traditional character can result in the diffusion of forces of dissolution which can cause great harm or even destruction to an already living tradition not to speak of organizations of purely human origin playing with forces far beyond their ken of understanding or power of control.” *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 40.

sacred scripture. Scripture possesses an inner dimension which is attainable only through intellection operating within a traditional framework.”⁸ So while the link between tradition and sacred scripture is clear, the relation between tradition and the sacred in general requires a some unpacking. 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 that one merely conforms to. On the other, a radical historical-critical method reduces the text to a set of social and moral commentaries on the historical conditions of the time and place in which it emerged. Against these two tendencies, a properly hermeneutical tradition reminds us that a holy text speaks again through a community of interpreters directly to the inner spirit of a listener by a divine act of illumination of the intellect. For Nasr this is the model of all knowledge. For in each act of intellection the mind is illuminated by the rays of divine intellect. As Nasr claims,

spiritual hermeneutics is the means whereby the intelligence, sanctified by revelation, is able to penetrate into the heart of revelation to discover that principial truth which 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.⁹

Thus in protecting the truths of sacred scripture from being reduced to external facts to be discovered, tradition, the handing down of spiritual and pastoral hermeneutic wisdom, provides the model that protects all knowledge from being reduced to external relations. In other words, all knowing, whether the discovery of the relations in the Pythagorean theorem or the optimal foraging strategy of bees, is a direct participation in the divine intellect that orders all things.

Second tradition also protects this understanding of inner illumination of the soul by the divine intellect from being reduced to some kind of private psychological experience of an atemporal disembodied subject. Nasr believes that this temptation to view platonic

⁸ *KS*, p. 68.

⁹ *KS*, p. 69.

metaphysics in overly subjectivist and dissociated, disembodied terms is exacerbated by the very inter-religious dialogue he is attempting. He writes, this attempt at inter-religious dialogue

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.¹⁰

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."¹¹

Finally, for Nasr, tradition is most specifically tied to the sacredness of the world in the way it reveals the symbolic nature of the things in that world. 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."¹² 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. However, with regard to the symbolism of things, tradition plays a more specific role. The final goal is to see all things as symbols of the divine reality. As Nasr writes, "in the hierarchic universe of traditional metaphysics, it can be said that every level of reality and everything on every level of reality is ultimately a symbol, only the Real being Itself as such."¹³ Some things, such as the sun and the rain, have an immediate analogical power to raise the soul upwards in its ascent toward the divine.

¹⁰ *KS*, p. 59.

¹¹ *KS*, p. 36.

¹² *KS*, p. 70.

¹³ *ibid.*

However, in their raw state these symbols tend to move us towards a vague and rather inchoate sense of transcendence. Further, we have a deeply ingrained tendency to see things as mere objects. It is only with the help of a tradition that our objectivist bias is overcome so that we can see the things in our everyday experience as symbols raising us upward to a divine reality and that even the natural power of things like sun and rain can take on more fully fleshed symbolic natures. As Nasr 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.¹⁴

Thus 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 led to see all of reality as full of sacred and particular natures drawing us towards the eternal.

Finally we must mention at least in passing the importance of authority for Nasr. Nasr’s great claim can be summarized thus: “the quest for the rediscovery of the sacred, whether carried out consciously or in the form of groping in the dark, has become an element of the life of that humanity which has already experienced the loneliness of a world from which the Spirit has been banished,” and further that “the rediscovery of the sacred is ultimately and inextricably related to the revival of tradition.”¹⁵ So, the recovery of tradition lies at the heart of his plea. But, he is also insistent that a tradition cannot survive without some kind of authority to safeguard the specificity of that tradition; for if a tradition is not bounded, it loses all threads of continuity. Then its symbols become merely a “maze of riddles,”¹⁶ its doctrine of

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *KS*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *KS*, p. 71.

illumination degenerates into merely subjective experience, and its history of scriptural exegesis becomes unmoored from any historical context. And thus tradition loses its power to reveal the sacred nature of reality.

So if Nasr is right, as we contemplate our prospects for the future, 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 tradition that recognizes the sacredness of a world that always points beyond itself and lifts us a culture toward the eternal divine reality. But while Nasr's vision demands more of us than any of the recent films we have seen about the future, he also suggests that we have the resources, if only we listen to the sacred, to not only keep our humanity intact, but to return to a vision of humanity as the bridge that opens all of the material world to the divine.

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