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Tradition in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Dariush Shayegan's Thought

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ABSTRACT: Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Shayegan are two well-known and influential Iranian intellectuals, and tradition has been a mutual field of interest for both scholars. However, some differences and dissimilarities in their views and interpretations can be detected. The main objective of this article is to understand and decode the different meanings of Tradition in the eye of these two scholars. Why Nasr, with his theistic, mystical, holistic point of view, considers Tradition "sacred" and defends it, while Shayegan, holding critical, pluralistic and non- religious perspective, regards Tradition "personal" and opposes it? According to the hypothesis and objective of this article, different theoretical and practical backgrounds of the two result in different views and interpretations. This article will take a close look at the issue applying Quentin Skinner and Thomas Spragens' background-oriented methodology.
Key words: Tradition, Spirituality, Modernism, the wholly

INTRODUCTION

Tradition plays a great role in the lives of Iranians today. Although after the Constitution and the advent of modern discussions, there was a fundamental change in both the life and thought system of Iranians, Tradition has always been one of the most important indexes of their lives. Since a gap between Tradition and modern life was created, Tradition has become the focus of greater attention. Shayegan and Nasr are two influential Iranian scholars of contemporary Iran who have called for returning to Tradition and have put special emphasis on it. While Shayegan, as we will discuss later, has had a deep and liberal approach toward Tradition, Nasr, adopting a rather fixed and unchanging stance, has seemed disinclined to modify and match it with foreign cultures and traditions. In his set of ideas, Tradition is holy and comprises all sub-divisions of religion like mysticism and other spiritualistic systems of worship (Nasr, 2007). The social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds that Nasr belongs to, together with his interest in Islamic – Iranian system of thought and spirituality, comprises his approach toward Tradition.

In comparison, Shayegan, having a different background from that of Nasr, exemplifies a movement that represents Corbin–Heideggerian ideas in Iran (Haghdar, 2006).

He has studied Tradition differently in two distinct periods. In his early studies, adopting a localistic approach, he talks about the differences between the West and the East. Like Nietzsche, he believes in Nihilism and finds its roots in the West. "Nietzsche believes that the gradual devaluation of all metaphysical values that have been rooted in the West will result in the death of God and nihilism. When the infrastructure, which is the belief in a holy pattern designed and pursued by God, is weakened, then the superstructure, i.e. all the values constructed upon it, will definitely collapse. The death of God approves the degradation of the forces that have been the designer of the holy history, and this can be called the "replacement aspect of nihilism", which results in the replacement of human wisdom for God and prophetic revelations, and in later stages, which is a reductive procedure, causes instincts and egotism replace wisdom (Shayegan, 1993).

Inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Jaspers, he believes that the west is an invader that attacks our local heritage. Shayegan wants to make a shield against modernism by resorting to tradition and spirituality (Borujerdi, 2008). In this period, and under the influence of Bacon, he talks about the "idols of the mind" which were put forward four centuries ago by him. "What Bacon meant by the idols of the mind can be interpreted as a set of beliefs that make up Tradition, and Tradition has a history that is not personal but collective. Since the history of any nation is also its genealogy and keeps its connection with the mythical and primordial events of that nation, we can call it the primordial history." (Shayegan, 2009a)

Shayegan in his later studies made some modifications in his previous ideas and talked about cultural segmentation and pluralism instead of Tradition. "Each minority represents a level of awareness. It is as though

we, through an inexplicable process, have accumulated all the history behind us in the time being. These levels are potential lives that come to reality by communication. Since we live in a variety of forms and the cognitive formats holding these forms together are diverse, their emergence can only be possible by getting mixed with each other." (Shayegan, 2009b).

Presently, by defending plural and fragmented identities rather than confronting modernism and defending Tradition, he refrains from his former criticism of tradition. He takes a pluralistic approach and believes that "Since every individual's relationship with others is interconnected and no culture by itself can satisfy his need to escape from the status quo, human beings have to live symbiotically with other cultures. The "others", in any form or origin, is always present in one's mind, and this presence broadens his mind and its ideological scope resulting eventually in the enhancement of his acquired knowledge. One, constantly facing a variety of conceptual stimuli and temptations, inevitably becomes a bricoleur. Bricolage today is a good denominator of our multi–layered personality."

Tradition, despite being literally the same, has a different meaning in the two scholars' system of thoughts. In this study, we will focus on this difference and try to prove that it is mainly generated under the impact of the social, environmental and linguistic backgrounds they belong to. Thus, we will investigate Tradition by reviewing their two backgrounds.

The hypothesis and main objective of this article is the meaning of Tradition in the mirror of society, culture, and language, and their effect on it. Under the influence of the above–mentioned parameters, Nasr has had a solid and inflexible approach, whereas Shayegan has been processional and pluralistic when dealing with Tradition.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To understand a school of thought or anyone's ideology, we need a method and different theoretical models. Any method has its own advantages and disadvantages for the researcher. Because of the semantic quality of the discussion, contextual methods will be used in this study. Altogether, Quentin Skinner's hermeneutics and Thomas Spragens' methodology will be appropriate according to the hypothesis and objective of the study. Hermeneutics, generally, studies the ethical, aesthetical, religious and historical meaning of a cultural phenomenon. It is interested in the meaning of culture, human history, and any personal experience of the individuals (Yvonne, 2008). One of the subdivisions of hermeneutics is subject–oriented or author–oriented hermeneutics. Skinner, having such an approach to hermeneutics, believes that the meaning of a given text can only be grasped by understanding its meaning from the writer's perspective. Using a philosophical method, he tries to comprehend any writer's ideas by pinpointing the linguistic background or the context he lived in. He explains the methodology of understanding and interpreting the ideas of the others in some of his books (Skinner, 2002). He sees hermeneutics as a method for interpreting texts, so he has formulated his own method to study political thoughts. The main objective of an author, he suggests, is to prove the meaning of the text, and the meaning cannot be understood just by reading it. Rather, one must go "beyond" it and search the purpose and motives of the writer together with the linguistic and social context to which he belongs. To him, knowing the motives leads to knowing the equation in which the author is an element (Manoochehri, 2008).

The writer might be confessing something that was once acceptable or unacceptable. So what he tells his readers is in fact revealing the truth about it (Skinner, 2004). Skinner applied his method to understand Hobbes and Machiavelli. According to him, to understand their political opinions, one must study his context and regenerate it. For instance, to understand Machiavelli's advices and ideas, it is very important to take a closer look at the time and place he lived in.

Thomas Spragens puts a great weight on the social and environmental backgrounds and their crucial role in understanding what a scholar meant by what he said or wrote. In his theory, known as the theory of the "crises", the main objective of theorists and political or social specialists is providing a solution for "problems". In other words, they initially target the environmental (political or social) problems of the society to which they belong. They try to study the different aspects of the problem and thereby give a proper solution based on well – processed methods so as to give people the opportunity to solve their problems rather than learning from trial –and–error (Spragens, 2008).

In this approach, the theorist takes the disorders and social problems around him into consideration and tries to tackle them. According to Spragens, a thinker's ideas and theories are reflected images of real-life problems. In addition to the social and political problems, the primary and secondary training of an intellectual is important. Every individual is shaped and brought up in a special social structure and under the influence of many high–profile figures. In other words, influential people play the role of arbitrators between the individuals and the world and manipulate it for them (Berger & Luckmann, 1996).

In this article, the environmental, social and linguistic backgrounds of Shayegan and Nasr will be reconstructed, their impact on the two pundits will be studied, and Tradition as an indicator of their ideas will be

discussed. Finally, it will be claimed that there is a direct relationship between the atmosphere they have lived in and the kind of Tradition they have meant.

Backgrounds forming Shayegan and Nasr's Theories

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Nasr was born in an educated, religious and political family. He was so influenced by his literary and well–cultured father that he calls him his first teacher of morality. His childhood included both religious and cultural education as well as acquaintance with well–known political and cultural figures of Iran in the Pahlavi dynasty. He found the modern world different from what he had observed in the traditional and religious life he had experienced. Referring to his childhood, he says, "Although I was struggling with philosophical issues together with the conflict between the west and the east, I never lost faith in God. I knew, even at that early years of my life, that there was a gap between following traditional values in art and ethics and being absorbed by seemingly-acceptable foreign values." (Nasr, 2003)

Besides, communication with high – ranking Sufi and Tehran Friday Prayers' Imam, Haeri, the traditional scholars like Fazel Toni, Malek– al –Shoara Bahar, and Seyyed Kazem Assar all had a great impact on Nasr. After he emigrated to the U.S for his high school and higher education, he got familiar with western philosophers such as Russell, Thomas Kohn. Acquaintance with anti–modernist writers like Santillana, Rene Guenon, Kumara Swami, and Hamilton Gape, a high–profile Islamologist, had more influence on him than any other modern theorists. The reflection of all this impact on Nasr is clearly seen in his doctorate thesis, in which he concentrated on science and knowledge in the Islamic civilization.

In Ananda Kumar Swami Library, he got to know other western traditionalists such as Frithjof schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis and Martin Lings, who had a profound effect on him.

Besides western traditional approaches, Nasr was interested in traditional Islamic philosophy in the form of "Philosophia Peremis", which he considers the extinguisher of flames of his mental crisis (Dinparast, 2004). Through Henry Corbin, he got interested in Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi and the Islamic mysticism, and following him, he regarded the East as the representative of enlightenment, wisdom, and spirituality (Borujerdi, 2008)

After Nasr returned to Iran, he pursued his interest in traditional and spiritual discussions by associating with the traditionalists like Allame Tabatabaei, Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Assar, Elahi Ghomshei, Abol Hassan Qazvini, and Morteza Motahhari. He believes, as we will discuss later, that Tradition is within Islamic–Iranian philosophy and mysticism, and holding this stance, he preferred the traditional and mystical life to its modern alternatives. In his theistic and God–centered opinion, the world is the symbol of God, who is present and aware of every   thing. As we can see, his primary education and social background together with his later academic studies built up his outlook.

Dariush Shayegan

Shayegan has been under different theoretical and practical backgrounds in his early and later periods of life. As a matter of fact, a variety of backgrounds can be detected since his childhood. He was primarily brought up in a multi–cultural and multi–lingual environment. In their family, Russian, Persian, Caucasian, and Georgian languages were used, and different forms of faith like Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrian were practiced. His life, more than being solid and pure, was mixed, multi–layered and plural. "My family atmosphere was so turbulent that it was too difficult to find your way out. As far as I remember, I lived in the disarrayed worlds in which no single thing was in its own place, where disparate languages and codes of knowledge in the form of random mosaics were set on or against each other in a way that I always thought I lived in the No Man's Land." (Shayegan, 2000)

Historically and socially, he belonged to an era in which western and modern values in the first and second Pahlavis' times were constantly imposed on Iran, and this clash between the two worlds attracted him so much.

His multiple journeys to the western and eastern countries like India and Italy opened his eyes to the colorful, though contradictory, cultures of the world. As he himself explains, with a traditionalist approach, when he studied eastern cultures especially India, he broke away from the west for seven years. The works like Idols of the Mind and Perennial Memory or Islamic societies confronting the west are the results of these mystical, secluded and solitary experiences. He had the opportunity to take advantage of both eastern and western scholars. The connection between science, religion, psychology and philosophy came from Jean Piaget and Ramon (Shayegan, 1993). Man and his status in the world was borrowed from Max Scheler; Eternal philosophy, form Rene Guenon; Indian mythology and Sanskrit from Jean Herbert. He formerly defended the local Iranian tradition and civilization but strongly avoided a radical or ideologized form of religion.

His return to Iran and his acquaintance with Iranian traditionalists like Allame Tabatabaei, Jalal Ashtiani and Elahi Ghamshei made him inclined toward Tradition. He had Genonian time as well as Heidegger Ian? (Jahanbegloo, 2008).

Shayegan once became interested in returning to the west through Heidegger and his doctrine. "What I learned from Iran in this period was the fact that the differences, the levels of awareness, the distance between

theory and knowledge, between tradition and the spirit of time, all made a huge gap between the old and the new ways of life which seem to be irreconcilable. "This was the point where my critical stance began".

His criticism reached its summit after he was influenced by Kant and Nietzsche. Being interested in nihilism and the constant replacement of the values, and over–emphasis on knowledge versus instincts, averted him from Tradition and spiritual or religious values.

Gianni Wattimo, the Italian philosopher, is one of those who have had a remarkable impact on Shayega's recent critical reviews of the world today. Being influenced by him and his deconstructive ideas, he wanted to prove that

Metaphysics is absurd, former ontologies are baseless, and we are dealing with a broken man living in broken world. "We are no longer dealing with the impenetrable walls of the old system of knowledge or rigid ontologies. Rather, a smashed existence which reveals itself in the form of bright and discrete particles of presence or thundering moments of awareness. The universal interdependence is what we see in all layers of existence and understanding (Gizil Sofla, 2010).

As we can see, Shayegan's secondary stage of thinking is critical of tradition and understanding modernity as well as cooperating with it. Under the above mentioned backgrounds, he doesn't believe that Tradition alone can be the solution to all man's problems and by recognizing the plural identities, mosaic tradition and modernity, he takes a hybrid and collaborative stance.

Tradition and its status in Shayegan and Nasr's doctrines

Nasr and Tradition

He explains his idea about tradition within the framework of the two background factors mentioned before. From his perspective, Tradition is not a habit, custom, or the coercive transference of thoughts and contents from one period to another, but a set of principles descended from the heaven and in nature, a special emanation of God's essence applied to a particular nation at any particular time and space. Furthermore, Tradition is immortal, permanent, and a lively (Nasr, 2006).

Nasr believes that Tradition is pure and divine, and it symbolizes God's will. Similarly, Tradition, ultimately being a sacred notion with its root in God, is the only means to reach God, who has thoroughly embraced the world and is always present in the very depth of all human beings. Thus, Tradition is in complete coordination with the prophetic revelations. Revelations symbolize a highest order of reality that can transcend man to higher altitudes of personality (Nasr, 2004). First, within the reach of all, is the Law, contained in essence in Quran, Elucidated by tradition and jurisprudence and taught by the doctors; it covers every aspect of the social and religious life of the believers. Beyond that lies the Path dealing with the inner aspect of things, which governs the spiritual life of those who have been elected to follow it. This has given rise to the various Sufi brotherhoods since it is actually a way of life built upon communication at a personal, nonsystematic level. Finally, there is the ineffable Truth itself, which lies at the heart of both these approaches (Nasr, 2006).

According to him, Tradition is also strongly related with the Philosophia Peremis. Traditionalists like Rene Guenon, Kumara Swami, Titus Burckhardt, and Nasr believe that the Philosophia Peremis has some special features in both metaphysics and ethics such that eventually tend to turn to the eternal facts like Tradition. As a matter of fact, it is a kind of traditionalism that cannot be understood without taking tradition into account. The elements representing Tradition in Nasr's philosophy are as follows:

Religion or prophetic revelations, which are the symbol of Tradition,

Islamic–Iranian mysticism and its other forms which have roots in God (Molla Sadra, Ibn Arabi, and Suhrawardi are the examples),

Godliness, which is seeing man, the world and other creatures in its Godly way,

Non–religious and non–jurisprudent spirituality,

Naturalism and living in peaceful co–existence with nature and regarding it as the holly symbol of God,

Monotheism and Pantheism – everything is the reflection of the One God,

Universality: tradition is present in every aspect of life such as society, culture, art, science etc.,

Sacredness,

The world as the emanation of God

The Islamic civilization, according to Nasr, is a whole which, like other traditional civilizations, is based on the regeneration of Abraham and Adam's revelations by Islam's holy prophet Mohammad (pbuh) (Nasr, B, 2006).

Tradition has different functions including soothing the mental confusions incited by the Islamophobia propagandized in the western media, rationally responding to the modernist challenges of religion and finally providing the required means to build relationship between the three Abrahamic religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Nasr, 2008). Nasr defends the homogeneous and pure identity of Tradition as opposed to modernity. Thus, "To safeguard Islam and Islamic civilization, we must defend the Islamic tradition wisely and consciously. Moreover, we must take a critical approach toward it in order to detect its shortcomings. Our intellectuals also must put away the psychological and cultural inferiority they feel facing the west" (Nasr, 2008).

The major difference between the traditional and modern sciences, as he explains, is "in the fact that modern studies are variable while in the traditional ones, the change happens clearly, and the continuity takes place through the study of symbols" (Nasr, 2004). The main elements of Tradition, in Nasr's theoretical system of thought, can be formulated in the following figure.

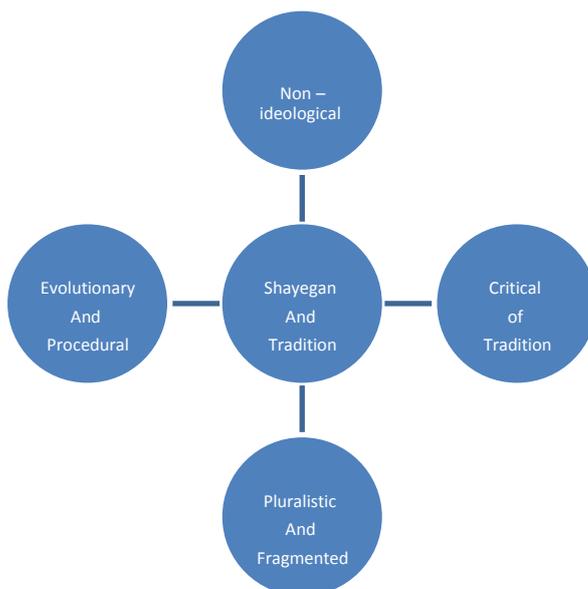Figure 1 . The main elements of Tradition in Nasr's theoretical system of thought

Figure 2. Tradition and its elements in Shayegan's set of beliefs Conclusion

Shayegan and Tradition

To Shayegan, the meaning and different components of Tradition have not been invariable and permanent. At least four approaches, based on his theoretical and practical backgrounds, can be tracked. In the first stage, he was under the influence of his education and orientalistic and Indialogical studies. Whilst anti-western and localistic sentiments were so prevalent among Iranian scholars, in making a choice between Tradition and modernity, he went for the Eastern–Iranian tradition. In this stage, he tries to explain the eastern cultures and civilizations by the rhymes shared by the Indian and Iranian tribes. Interest in both ancient – Budhist India and Zarathustrian – Ishragh philosophy were the outcomes of this stage of his intellectual life.

In the second stage, which was the result of his acquaintance with the Islamic discourse in Iran, especially Allame Tabatabaei and the Islamic mysticism, he was bemused by the Islamic and religious spiritual sentiments. In the next stage, Shayegan looks at Tradition from a comparative perspective. After he got familiar with Henry Corbin, his comparative studies on India, Islam, China and the west started. Comparing the Asian and European or western civilizations was among his interests in the third stage (Seyyed Abadi, 2012). In the

last stage, his critical view toward Tradition and its distinction from modernism begins. Altogether, the difference between Tradition and modernism in this stage is highlighted as well as taking a positive stance toward modernity. According to him, since the 16th century, the west has replaced the religious system with the civil society and has lost its spiritual purity. This has led to the present crises which reveal themselves in four forms: Degeneration of culture, Decline of gods, Death of myths, and downfall of spirituality, all of which are the result of the domination of technocracy in life (Borujerdi, 2008).

The duality between Tradition and modernity is itself the result of modernity and has happened since Tradition lagged behind his former functions in morality, social affairs, religion, etc. in a way that ideological religion and Tradition have lost their spiritual and heavenly novelty (Hashemi, 2010). Seeing religion as a cultural phenomenon not a matter of ideology is what Shayegan goes for. In the last stage, he has adopted a more liberal approach toward Tradition. The ground on which Tradition stood in the past is now debased and Tradition itself has been marginalized to personal and private aspects of life. "I am telling that Tradition and the like must be marked as personal. It is not universal and has different meanings from one individual to another. I have always tried not to mix up different domains of study with each other and it implicates the fact that cultures are different and no particular culture should be put superior to another.

Shayegan, unlike Nasr, does not expect Tradition to be universal and homogeneous. He has refrained from supporting the purity and homogeneity theory of Tradition in his recent studies. On the contrary, he sees the whole world in confusion and fragmented. Tradition today is changeable and evolutionary and strongly under the hegemony of modernity or the like.Tradition and its elements in Shayegan's set of beliefs are shown in the chart below Ideas and opinions are not shaped in vacuum and out of the blue. Rather, they emerge through a continuous process and evolution. In this article, using the context–oriented models and theories, we examined the role of background training in the formation of concepts and ideas. The methodological objective of this study is to prove the role of background training in the existence of any idea. The environmental, social, family, intellectual, linguistic and theoretical atmosphere in which a scholar lives plays a significant and direct role in his or her ideology. The subjective and objective backgrounds and their importance in Skinner and Spragens' theories were discussed, and in this framework, we examined the ideology of two prominent contemporary Iranian scholars. Nasr and Shayegan have been interested in Tradition and spirituality, and in the clash between Tradition and modernity, have to some extent supported Tradition. Nonetheless, there have been some serious and occasionally fundamental differences. Shayegan, in two stages of his studies, adopts different approaches toward Tradition and by distancing from his former opinions and reviewing them, he takes a new stance and observed Tradition as a flexible and evolutionary issue. In the researchers' view, in order to understand and decode the meaning of Tradition and its implications, one must refer to the backgrounds and atmospheres that they were born and bred in.

Nasr, because of living in a traditional, spiritual and mystical environment, and not being bothered about modernism and the like, has constantly approved of Tradition and supported it. Sacredness, godliness, monotheism, pantheism, homogeneity, etc. are the characteristics of Tradition in his system of thought.

Shayegan, on the other hand, owing to his background that was distinct from that of Nasr's, has adopted a different perspective, especially in his recent period of intellectual life. The heterogeneous and fragmented context has led him to a pluralistic and hybrid ideology. Leaving his essence–oriented, localistic, and homogeneous approach toward Tradition, he switched to a flexible, procedural and personal approach. He opposes the ideological view and by seeing it as plural, interactive and personal, he approves of modernity and never regards the two as black-and-white. He does not defend Tradition against modernity. Instead, he accepts it as a private and personal matter in both modern and postmodern worlds. The two scholars' ideologies have been compared in the table below:

Table 1. scholars' ideologies.

Shayegan and Tradition	Nasr and Tradition
Non–religious and deistic	Religious and theistic
Plural and fragmented	Islamic–Iranian mysticism
Procedural and evolutionary	God–centered and Godly
Non–ideological	Monotheistic and mystic
Personal and private	Naturalistic and living symbiotically with nature
	Sacred
	Homogeneous

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