



LECTURE REPORT

Finding the Sacred in a Distracted Age

“Islam, Spirituality, and the Modern World”

Sunday, October 18, 2026 · 12:00 PM · Diyanet Center of America - Ottoman Hall

A report on the special conversation with Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, University Professor of Islamic Studies Emeritus at The George Washington University, hosted by the Diyanet Islamic Research Institute at the Diyanet Center of America.

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A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

A Word of Thanks

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

Dear brothers and sisters, dear friends of the Diyanet Center of America,

On Sunday, October 18, 2026, we had the honor of welcoming Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr to the Diyanet Center of America. Professor Nasr told us that he rarely gives lectures these days, and that he accepted our invitation because of his long attachment to Türkiye. We are grateful to him for sharing his time, his knowledge, and his wisdom with our community.

This center was built with a prayer and a purpose: to bring people closer to Allah through ibadah, ilm, hikmah, and service to others. We want it to be a place where people find peace, where scholars are welcomed, and where young people feel at home asking questions about faith and life. This gathering brought that purpose to life, and we were especially glad to see so many young people in the hall.

Our tradition teaches: *الحكمة ضالة المؤمن*, “Wisdom is the believer’s lost treasure.” Our lives are busy, and our phones ask for our attention at every moment, yet our hearts long for something beyond what we can buy, own or achieve. Professor Nasr reminded us that the sacred has never left our world. It is we who have become absent from it.

I thank the Diyanet Islamic Research Institute for hosting the program, our staff and volunteers, and everyone who joined us in person and online. Through DIRI, we hope to keep bringing our community together with scholars who can guide and inspire us. May Allah grant Professor Nasr health and strength, bless his work, and make this gathering a means of remembrance for all of us.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatih Kanca

Chair, Advisory Board

Diyanet Center of America

01 OVERVIEW

THE PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

The program was held on **Sunday, October 18, 2026, at 12:00 PM** in the Ottoman Hall of the Diyanet Center of America in Lanham, Maryland. More than 100 guests attended in person, and more than 50 followed the live stream on the DCA YouTube channel. Yilmaz Acar, Research Coordinator at DIRI, hosted and moderated. After welcoming remarks by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatih Kanca, Professor Nasr spoke for about forty-five minutes and then took questions from the host and the audience. The program closed with a gift presentation and a book signing.

The title of the program, **“Finding the Sacred in a Distracted Age,”** was chosen by the hosts, and Professor Nasr began by taking it apart. He asked why this age is distracted, and distracted from what. His answer set the tone for the hour: the modern world is distracted from Reality “with a capital R,” drawn toward everything that does not come from God.

Main Points of the Lecture

- ◆ **The sacred was once everywhere:** in every traditional civilization it was like the air people breathed, so no one needed to speak about it. We notice it now because it has been lost.
- ◆ **The loss began in one place:** modern Western civilization was the first to move the sacred away from the center of life, and this outlook later spread across the world along with Western power.
- ◆ **Revelation is the source:** religion carries revelation through history, and there is no way to revive the sacred in our lives without it.
- ◆ **Thought and art were once sacred too:** from algebra to carpet weaving, traditional Islamic learning and making always kept a reference to God.
- ◆ **The search is part of being human:** God placed the yearning for the sacred in the human heart, and even seeking without knowing what one seeks is a virtue.
- ◆ **The door is never fully closed:** those who “remember to remember” find it open, because God’s mercy encompasses all things.

02 THE SPEAKER

THE SPEAKER AND HIS OPENING

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies Emeritus at The George Washington University and one of the best-known scholars of Islamic philosophy, science and spirituality. Born in Tehran in 1933, he studied physics at MIT and earned his doctorate in the history of science at Harvard. His Gifford Lectures, published as *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), remain a central statement of the traditionalist school.

In the lecture he called himself “a humble student” of this school, which holds that truth began with Adam and has been renewed through the prophets ever since. He recalled that as a sophomore at MIT, first in his class in physics and mathematics, he turned away from modern Western science and philosophy “not by not knowing it, but by knowing it.”

Professor Nasr opened with **a few words about Türkiye**, a country he said he has “a very weak spot” for. He called the Diyanet Center a remarkable contradiction of history: the one Muslim country that changed its weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday and changed its alphabet is the same country that built a monument of classical Ottoman architecture near the capital of the United States. He described the Center as an achievement for Muslims in America and for Türkiye itself, and as part of a new chapter in Turkish history which, in his view, began when President Erdoğan came to power.

Four Points from His Opening

A Hard Experience to Learn From

No other Muslim country that went through what Türkiye endured after 1920, he said, would have produced scholars like his former student İbrahim Kalın. The experience is a lesson for all Muslims.

The Head of Asia

Quoting a Turkish friend, he said Turks must choose between being the tail of Europe or the head of Asia, and that it is time to look east as well.

“Give Us the Faith of the Turks”

In 1968 he accompanied the Shah of Iran on a royal visit to Saudi Arabia, where he heard King Faisal say in Arabic: “O Lord, give us the faith of the Turks.”

Nomads Who Built Cities

Architecture is a settled, urban art, yet a nomadic people from Central Asia created one of the greatest schools of Islamic architecture.

03 THE LECTURE, PART I

DEFINING THE SACRED

Before turning to the age, Professor Nasr asked what we mean by the sacred. The word is used loosely today, he noted, as in a “sacred cow,” or when someone says a baseball game is sacred to him. In its original sense, from the Latin sacer, it points to the Divine. In Islam one of the names of God is al-Quddus (القدوس), the Holy, and Jerusalem was called Bayt al-Maqdis (بيت المقدس), the Holy House, because of its connection with revelation. The word therefore stands, he said, at the heart of every Islamic language.

Key Terms in the Lecture

TERM	ARABIC / PERSIAN	IN THE LECTURE
al-Quddus	القدوس	The Holy, one of the names of God, from the root of the word for the sacred
Bayt al-Maqdis	بيت المقدس	Jerusalem, the Holy House, sacred through its link to revelation
tafakkur	تفكر	Reflection: “by thinking about God you come to God”
san'a, al-Sani'	صناعة / الصانع	Art as making; God as the Supreme Maker
ayat	آيات	Signs: everything in creation points to a reality that belongs to God
khud, Khuda	خود / خدا	Persian for self and God, which he presented as sharing one root

Why the Question Arises Now

- ◆ **The sacred was like the air.** No one in sixteenth-century Vienna spoke of air pollution, because the air was clean. People become aware of something once it is gone, and in traditional civilizations the sacred was the norm of all life.
- ◆ **The modern West moved it from the center.** Modern Western civilization was the first to remove the sacred from the center of its concerns. Eastern Christianity did not take the same path, he noted, but Western Christianity, from Austria westward and later in the Americas, began to secularize.



- ◆ **Something lost is now felt.** Unlike in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, many people today sense that something central has been lost, “like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.”
- ◆ **America still has openings.** Its vast nature, much of it untouched, is a place where “the voice of God can be heard,” and Native American traditions, in which the sacred was everywhere, still survive.

The Fish and the Water

Many primal religions, he said, have no word for the sacred, **not because nothing is sacred, but because everything is sacred.** He illustrated this with a Sufi story he has often written about. A small fish asks its mother, “They keep talking about water, but what is water?” The mother answers, “Show me what is not water, and I will show you what water is.” This is how the sacred lived in traditional times. Only when the fish is taken out of the water does it realize that something other than water exists, and that, he said, is the age in which we live.

A Question of Life and Death

Some ask why the sacred should be rediscovered at all, if things seem to be going well. Professor Nasr answered that any serious person today knows something is gravely wrong with the world. Extrapolate the energy and material we consume, he said, and see where it lands us. For him the question of the sacred is therefore “in a sense a question of life and death.”

04 THE LECTURE, PART II

WHERE THE SACRED IS FOUND

Professor Nasr then named the fields in which traditional civilizations found the sacred. All of them matter, he said, but from the traditionalist point of view revelation comes first. Revelation rests on the belief that there is a Divine Reality that created and sustains the world and gave us His laws, and that all authentic knowledge comes from it. Every word of this, he added, would be accepted by any traditional Muslim, Sunni or Shiite.

وحي

REVELATION,
CARRIED BY RELIGION

تفكر

TAFAKKUR,
THOUGHT

صنعة

SAN'A,
ART AS MAKING

- ◆ **Religion:** there is no way to reach the sacred, or revive it in our lives, without religion. Yet there are also pseudo-religions and distortions, from minor deviations to anti-religion posing as religion. His main example was communism, “a religion without God” that claims the whole of a person’s life.
- ◆ **Prophecy is universal:** Islam holds that about 124,000 prophets were sent and that no people was left without guidance (Fatir 35:24): وَإِنْ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ إِلَّا خَلَا فِيهَا نَذِيرٌ, “There was never a community but that a warner passed among them.” Adam was both the father of humanity and its first prophet, so history begins with monotheism; people later fell into polytheism and disbelief. The one particularity of Islam, he said, is its finality.
- ◆ **Thought (tafakkur, تفكر):** human beings cannot stop thinking, and “by thinking about God you come to God.” Before modern times all intellectual activity carried a divine reference. Even the classic Arabic book of algebra opens with the Basmala, and Muslim astronomy, mathematics and trigonometry grew in a universe where numbers, stars and stones were signs (ayat, آيات) of a higher reality.
- ◆ **Art (san'a, صنعة):** the English word comes from the Latin ars, “to make,” and the Arabic san'a also means making; God, he noted, is al-Sani' (الصانع), the Supreme Maker. Sacred art, such as the chanting of the Qur'an, stands at the center of traditional art, and the other arts reflect it.
- ◆ **The carpet:** carpet weaving goes back to Achaemenid Persia, but it flowered with Islam. Because the Prophet’s forehead touched the ground before God, the ground itself became sanctified. Muslims pray on the carpet, and in a traditional house they also eat and sleep on it.



- ◆ **Art that does not deceive:** unlike post-Renaissance painting, which makes a flat surface look three-dimensional, Islamic art such as the Persian miniature brings out vertical, hierarchical realities. For more, he pointed to his own writings on Islamic art and to Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt and Frithjof Schuon.

05 THE LECTURE, PART III

REDISCOVERING THE SACRED

In the last part of the lecture Professor Nasr turned to a question he said should concern anyone who takes the meaning of life seriously: how do we find the sacred now? From the Islamic point of view, he answered, God Himself placed the yearning for the sacred in the hearts of men and women. Many people reject God, yet they are still searching for the real and the true, and in the end nothing satisfies the soul except the ocean of divinity from which it came.

Scripture and Sayings He Cited

THEME	SOURCE	HIS POINT
Return	يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً (al-Fajr 89:27-28)	“O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, satisfied and satisfying.” Wealth, health and reputation never satisfy; this return is the goal of life.
Presence	A Sufi saying	“Do not seek God’s presence; God is present everywhere. Seek your own presence.” The sacred is everywhere; it is we who are absent.
Remembrance	تَسُوا اللَّهَ فَنَسِيَهُمْ (al-Tawba 9:67)	“They forgot God, so He forgot them.” Yet for those who “remember to remember,” God opens the door.
Mercy	وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ (al-A‘raf 7:156)	“My mercy encompasses all things.” The divine names join rigor and forgiveness, majesty and mercy.

The Grandeur and the Danger of Being Human

- ◆ **Seeking is itself a virtue:** everyone seeks the sacred, though not everyone finds it, often for lack of discernment. A person who stops seeking stops being who he or she really is, because wholeness is impossible without holiness.

- ◆ **Self and Self:** to seek God is to go beyond the small self toward the Self with a capital S. In Persian, he noted, khud (خود), self, and Khuda (خدا), God, share the same root.
- ◆ **Nature has not changed:** the sun still rises, cherry trees still give cherries and birds still fly on two wings. Only the human being has changed. He dismissed the theory of evolution as, in his view, a way of forgetting God and the divine causes of things.
- ◆ **An eagle or a worm:** an eagle cannot fall below being an eagle, but a human being can rise like an eagle or sink like a worm in the ground. Both possibilities are before us, and God has kept the door to Himself open.

06 DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The host opened the discussion, and five questions from the audience followed. His answers are summarized below, with **his reply on artificial intelligence** given in more detail.

FROM	QUESTION	RESPONSE IN BRIEF
Host	Is the loss of the sacred tied to growing human power over nature?	We first lost our sense of the Divine, then decided to play God ourselves. The movement began in Western Europe as an assertion of human independence from the Church and from revelation, and spread with colonial power.
Audience	What is the wisdom behind science growing without the sacred?	“There’s no wisdom whatsoever,” though there are reasons. Modern science explains the universe independently of God; the “God hypothesis” enters no physics book, even when individual physicists believe.
Audience	How will we find the sacred when AI fills every space?	“Artificial intelligence is artificial but not intelligent.” It cannot pray from the heart or think independently. See below.
Audience	Why are people moving away from God in our era?	Spiritually, history descends rather than progresses, and each revelation lifts humanity up again. He cited the hadith on following a tenth of God’s law (see box).

Audience	How can we argue academically that monotheism came first?	The academic view reflects a Western philosophy of progress. The Qur'an teaches that guidance began with Adam, and he rejected the opposite claim firmly: such scholarship cannot know when Noah lived, much less what he believed.
Audience	Where do we draw the line between seeking and stopping?	"Seek and you shall find." Seek the sacred until you find it, and once you find it, never let it go.

THE HADITH HE CITED

إِنَّكُمْ فِي زَمَانٍ مَنْ تَرَكَ مِنْكُمْ عَشْرَ مَا أَمَرَ بِهِ هَلَكَ، ثُمَّ يَأْتِي زَمَانٌ مَنْ عَمِلَ مِنْهُمْ بِعَشْرٍ مَا أَمَرَ بِهِ نَجَا

"You live in a time in which whoever abandons a tenth of what he has been commanded will perish. Then a time will come in which whoever acts on a tenth of what he has been commanded will be saved." (al-Tirmidhi)

Professor Nasr cited this hadith to show that the Islamic sources describe a gradual decline of the human condition, until the appearance of the Mahdi and the return of Christ, rather than steady progress.

On Artificial Intelligence

One audience member noted that AI systems now imitate human thinking and act in the world, and that some of their makers seem almost to venerate what they have built. How, he asked, can we find the sacred when the human is disappearing from everywhere? Professor Nasr answered that **"artificial intelligence is artificial but not intelligent."** You only get out of it what you put into it. It can play a prayer like a gramophone, but it cannot pray from the heart or think independently. He did not expect AI to destroy the human race, but he did expect "a devastating effect" in further separating human beings from their real selves. And if a machine ever wrote poetry like Keats or Shakespeare, he added, that would not negate God. It would only show that God is everywhere.

07 CONCLUSION

CLOSING

Professor Nasr closed with a reminder that **the light from above is never completely shut**. If it were, he said, we would not be sitting in this room. Even in an age of forgetfulness and distraction, there are people who are never distracted from the one thing to which we should always be attracted: our home, God, from whom we come and to whom we return.

We are grateful to **Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr** for his time, his candor and a lifetime of work on these questions, and to **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatih Kanca**, who presented him with a gift on behalf of the Center and thanked him for writings and lectures that have inspired Muslims and non-Muslims around the world.

His last words echo a familiar verse of the Qur'an,

"Truly we belong to God, and to Him we return"

(*al-Baqarah* 2:156): **إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ**