

An Interview: With Dr. Carol Parrish-Harra

Rev. Carol Parrish-Harra, PhD, retired in 2010 after many years' service as founding dean of the Sancta Sophia Seminary, pastor of the Light of Christ Community Church, and spiritual leader of the Sparrow Hawk Village community, all at Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Her books, including *The New Age Handbook on Death and Dying*; *Messengers of Hope: The Walk-In Phenomenon* (now in expanded second edition); *Sophia Sutras*; and her three volume *Adventures in Meditation* have been influential in the esoteric community.

Dr. Parrish-Harra has received many honors and recognitions for her work as a teacher, author, minister, and mystic. In 1998 the World Network of Religious Futurists honored her with the Earl Award for outstanding service in advancing the contribution of world religions to the future of humanity. In 2005 at Saint Petersburg, Russia Dr. Parrish-Harra was presented the International Nebolsin Award for outstanding service in the field of education for the common good of humanity, in company with Alexander Putin, president of the Russian federation; Nobel Laureate Jores Alferov; and M. Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage Museum.

Esoteric Quarterly: You left a promising business career in 1971 to seek ordination as a minister. The rest, as they say, is history. But can you share some insights into what motivated you to take that step?

Carol Parrish-Harra: In 1958 I had a near death experience and came back changed and knowing what my life was about. The “presence” never left me and I have tried to “dignify” the work as I was asked to do. Later, that kind of experience became known as Soul-Exchange or Walk-In Experience.

EQ: Who were your most important mentors in those early days—or more recently?

CP-H: Ann C. Manser of Florida was an influential teacher and guide. I also studied with Vera Stanley Alder from London and Bournemouth, England, and later with Torkom Saraydarian of California and Arizona. Torkum is believed to have been one of the students personally supervised by the Tibetan Master, Djwhal Khul. Since then I have added a number of favorite teaching authors, including Manly P. Hall, Tau Malachi, and John White.

EQ: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment in your years of ministry and teaching?

CP-H: Enduring it all and always loving the work.

I strongly believe that a number of the books that I authored were guided by Spirit. The three volumes of *Adventures in Awareness* took me nine years of great effort. *The New Dictionary of Spiritual Thought* has proved to be a priceless aid to beginners. Despite its title it is written in a narrative style. Writing the *Sophia*

Sutras was the most fun, although it was a challenge to document.

EQ: If you had your time over again, is there anything you would have done differently?

CP-H: Of course. I would have prayed more for serious disciples who wanted to carry on the work and were capable of doing so. As it is, many students want to “act like” they “know” and just want to receive a piece of paper—thinking that certification makes them holy! Also, many people are angry with tradition and want to rebel; but they don’t have a good grasp of what needs to be done or how to do the real work. Fortunately, a few really dedicated students dignify their lives instead of feeding *maya* and illusion.

EQ: Your career covered much of the life cycle of the New Age movement. What do you think were the movement’s enduring effects—good and bad—on more serious esoteric studies and practices?

CP-H: Torkom Saraydarian told me once that psychic play, with superficial interests, provides a smoke screen, behind which the real workers could be protected from harm. I think all those who have been touched will move forward slowly, and the real disciples will be richly blessed.

EQ: The Divine Feminine Sophia has meant much to you, and certainly you have helped promote awareness of her in your writings and teachings. How do you

view Sophia—as compared, say, with Mary the mother of Jesus or the Buddhist Kwan Yin—as a guiding principle for the Aquarian Age?

We struggle to define “mystic.” Perhaps we can say that the mystic “knows” God in some intimate way. Mystics testify to more than just an earthly experience. They have brought together heart and mind to know God as a Divine Presence. People come to this “knowing” in their own way; it does not require a commitment to the contemplative life. Simplicity of being is the most obvious outer sign...

CP-H: I believe Sophia is Mother Wisdom. Respectfully, I give honor to Mary, Mother of Jesus, and to Kwan Yin as personifications of Sophia or the Divine Mother. I believe we have had wonderful masculine figures as the icons of the last period. Now I think we will become more aware of the holy feminine working behind the scenes. These workers were called “*taras*” meaning fountains. They stayed in one place most of the time (except when working in other worlds) and watered

the seeds so they would grow. Males could travel more freely and the females could hold the energy in a sacred place...for many this was the community in which they dwelt.

EQ: In your various trips to Russia you observed the resurgence of the Orthodox Church. What influence do you think Eastern Christianity can have on esoteric studies and practices in the decades to come?

CP-H: I made nine trips to the Soviet Union and to Russia between 1987 and 2005. Eastern Orthodoxy is very significant as it expects everyone to end up as a mystic. The Eastern Churches remember the traditional steps to making a mystic. In time this will be better understood in the West.

EQ: What form do you think organized religion will take over the century or two, and what will be its relationship to esoteric studies and practice?

CP-H: I believe organized religion has been so restricted that people will continue to leave it behind. There will be an increase in prayer, visualization, and meditation groups in the future, so individuals can express themselves more freely. I think we are watching the Church of Paul and the Church of John come together to form a vehicle of grace. Everyone ought to reread *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels. All inner life is a mystery and all of us are called to be mystics.

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EQ: Although you remain professionally active, you have passed the torch to a younger generation at Sancta Sophia, the Light of Christ Community Church, and Sparrow Hawk Village. What general advice would you give them, based on your years of experience and your awareness of changing conditions in the world?

CPH: People need to know that “they don’t know” when they take on public work. I began my studies in 1965 and was ordained in 1971, forty years ago. But I have learned more since 1981.

Before that I was just laying a foundation for what I was to learn later on. The Masters will only work with you, not for you.

EQ: Would you give different advice to your many former seminary students who have taken up professional positions throughout the nation and beyond?

CP-H: I think it is foolish to give too much credit to a piece of paper—graduation or certification. If you really are an esotericist you will never stop striving, studying and pondering. You are to be true to your commitment to whatever vows you make to the best of your ability and both serve and work to keep your own light shining.

EQ: Is there anything else you would like to tell readers of *The Esoteric Quarterly*?

CP-H: Many people who are dabbling are really just waking up. Few recognize the sacrifices disciples really have to make. In a world transforming we are moving ahead but must remember that there is always someone ahead of us and some one behind. Link hands and it is easier for us all.

EQ: What do you envision yourself doing in the next ten years or so?

CP-H: Primarily, I want to go on teaching and writing. I love my “Conversations with Carol” class. I may travel more but am not ready for too much at this time.

EQ: We very much appreciate your taking the time for this interview. We wish you every blessing for the future. And may your next ten years be even more fruitful than the last!

Fundamentals of the Work

An occasional column on aspects of the work, written for students by the staff of the School for Esoteric Studies.

Recollection

One of the most basic practices a student aspiring to discipleship must employ, in addition to meditation, is the daily practice of recollection, which has also been referred to in some literature as “Self remembering.”

Recollection is defined as a moment of heightened consciousness during which we realign the personality with the Soul and remember that our true Self is the Soul. This links us up with the group Soul and puts us in tune with the One Life. In this way we become a channel for the inflow of light to the personality and, through the personality, to our environment.

Since this practice only takes a few seconds and does not require any special thoughtform construction or refocusing of our attention, it can be carried out no matter what we are doing and no matter where we are. We simply “wake up” into a higher level of conscious awareness.

In order to make this practice of recollection a daily habit, we begin by choosing a particular time of day, preferably a time when we are most likely to remember to do it, so that a daily rhythm can be established. One practical suggestion is to implant the intention to recollect at a particular time as a final step in the morning meditation.

The Tibetan, in *Discipleship in the New Age*, Vol. 2, pp. 647-648, recommends five particular points of recollection during the day, each taking only a few seconds, in order to establish a “living continuity of sensed relationship” in our consciousness:

1. On awakening in the morning, before rising.
2. At noon.
3. At sunset, whatever hour that may be.
4. On retiring at night.
5. At the time of the group meditation, whenever you may decide to do it.

Once the practice is firmly established, we will find that we begin to recollect at other times of the day as we anticipate the actual time of recollection. This is greatly to be desired because our eventual goal is to recollect as often as we can during the day in order to create a continuity of consciousness.

The Tibetan refers to this continuity of consciousness in *A Treatise on White Magic*, p. 423, where he refers to the need for disciples to be able to be in telepathic rapport with each other:

The second requirement that will establish relation between the working disciples in this group is the capacity to preserve a constant and sequential recollection of both the inner and the outer life. We call it continuity of consciousness, and by this we mean the power to be fully aware of all happenings in all spheres and departments during the entire twenty-four hours of the day.

In *The Light of the Soul*, Book 3, Sutra 11 (pp. 262-263), we read about developing control over the mental body and the importance of establishing a habit of recollection in order to attain it:

The ideal condition is that of being in a state of realization all day every day. The ability at will to draw upon the resources of the Ego, the constant recognition that one is a [Soul] incarnate upon the physical plane, and the ability to draw down, when needed, the power and the force of the Soul, is one which will be eventually achieved by every aspirant! But first, however, the habit of recollection has to

be instituted and the instantaneous ability to restrain the modifications of the thinking principle has to precede this desirable state of being.

The goal of achieving a continuity of consciousness throughout the day is also mentioned on pp. 420-421 of *The Light of the Soul* (Book 4, Sutra 25):

All meditation work, all moments of reflection, all affirmative exercises, all hours of recollection of one's true nature are means employed to detach the mind from the lower reactions and tendencies, and build in the habit of a constant realization of one's true divine nature. When this realization is achieved, the need for

such exercises ceases and one enters into one's heritage. The isolation referred to [in Sutra 25] is the detachment of the self from the field of knowledge, the refusal of the self to seek outward-going sensuous experience and standing firm in the state of spiritual being.

When we are immersed in our daily work, in our self-made lives, it is all too easy to feel separate and asleep to spiritual realities, but when we venture out into the realm of the Soul, there is nothing separating us from Life, and the Soul lets us know of its all-pervading presence through an exquisite feeling of connectedness and joy.

Book Review

***The Need for a Sacred Science*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.** Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993. Paperback, 175 pages.

Since the Seventeenth century, the doctrine of scientific materialism has come to dominate western civilization's concept of the natural sciences, along with its history, philosophy, economics and politics. Based on the so-called "superior method" of reductionist logic, scientific materialism presumes that the material world—the external world of objective reality—is the only reality that exists. Modern science is apt to claim that objective reality is independent of any subjective or metaphysical influences or causes. It explains immaterial or subjective truths in material terms and tends to see humankind as an accident and God as a delusion. The catastrophic result, in Dr. Nasr's view, has been the loss of a sacred cosmic order that threatens humanity's spiritual and temporal existence.

The remedy for such a profound "loss of Center," as Professor Nasr maintains, is the Supreme Science of meta-physics—the *scientia sacra*—defined by the author as the sacred knowledge which springs from all great or divinely inspired revelation. For Nasr, one of the world's leading perennial philosophers and proponents of the "traditionalist school," the sacred sciences are the "traditional sciences that lie at the center of man and at the heart of all orthodox and authentic religions attainable by the intellect...and the inner spiritual faculties."

In a series of inspired and exquisitely written essays, Nasr outlines the basic principles and metaphysical foundations of sacred science and explains their applicability to the macrocosm as well as the microcosm. He contrasts metaphysical knowledge with contemporary science and discusses how scientific thinking has altered humanity's image of itself and contributed to the major problems that the world currently faces.

Dr. Nasr's call for a sacred science begins with a discussion of how modern secular science has severed the connections between humanity and the Divine and reduced reality to an externally experienced world where nothing exists but matter and where nothing is revered but the pursuit of material pleasure or progress. The development of rationalistic thought, in Nasr's view, has created a world where the "knowing self" along with its "objective and subjective poles of knowledge" are diminished and "reduced to a single level of awareness." His first series of essays, contrasts this restrictive and inadequate outlook with the traditionalist perspective, which posits "God as Reality," and which envisions a hierarchic multiplicity of intelligences behind the forces of nature and the external world of the senses.

It is possible, Nasr maintains, to gain knowledge of the Absolute and to know Him as "Ultimate Reality" through "the twin sources of revelation and intellection." In other words, such an awareness can only be gained through the *sophia perennis* or traditional wisdom embodied in the revealed doctrines of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, the Vedas, and all sapiential and unitive traditions. Nasr's considerable knowledge of traditionalist teaching and intellectual traditions, in addition to his advanced degrees in science, allow him to present an insightful and integrated overview of the perennial wisdom within the context of sacred science. This overview draws numerous parallels from Islam and diverse traditions concerning self-awareness and the ultimate nature of the Self, as well as metaphysical notions regarding the Oneness of Spirit, human destiny, eternity and time.

Nasr also considers the themes of unity and diversity and their denial by secularized societies. He argues that it is necessary to "realize the unity of the Spirit behind the multiplicity of religious forms in order to reach the peace that human beings seek." Truth, as Nasr contends, "is One, but its expressions are many." The

esoteric nexus that all religions contain are intended to serve as a background upon which individual and societal values and ethics must be based. From a traditionalist perspective, the recognition of a singular esoteric essence lying at the heart of diverse forms is necessary to counter the moral relativism and absolutism of self-authority or individualism that scientific materialism and secular humanism advocates.

Rejecting the purely historical and academic approach toward sacred teachings, Nasr calls for a true *philosophia perennis* that concerns itself with every aspect of religion. Such an approach must necessarily include an understanding of “the relationship between God and man, revelation, mysticism, sacred art, symbol, ritual, religious law, social ethics, theology and cosmology.” In addition to the aforementioned disciplines, the “spiritual significance of nature” is seen as being of utmost importance to the sacred sciences. Its significance, as Nasr explains, can be seen in the order, harmony, contemplative beauty, cooperation and complementarity that nature exhibits as well as the laws that make these and other attributes feasible. Nature is a “cosmic book”, containing the “words and letters of a sacred language written by the creative power of Divinity upon the tablet of cosmic existence.”

The final series of essays in this book deal with the confrontation between the traditionalist framework and the modern predicament. Nasr provides a sharp critique of the problems caused by “materialist science” and its various offspring. He touches on a number of social, psychological, environmental and economic problems, such as the erosion of values and ethical foundations, depression, alienation and nihilism, as well as the myth of unending material progress, which Nasr sees as “stimulating consumption and the satisfaction of novel caprice and artificial desire.” Nasr, who was one of the first to express his concerns about the environmental crisis, includes an essay on the environment as seen from an Islamic perspective. In this view “the solution of the environmental problem cannot but come from the cure of the spiritual malaise of modern man

and the rediscovery of the world of Spirit, which being compassionate always gives of Itself to those open and receptive to Its vivifying rays.”

Nasr’s reflections upon some of the distinctive features of modern existence touch upon the unnoted results of secularism. Secularization, as he argues, has “sought to replace the traditional concept of man with one which divorces him from his Divine Archetype.” It “extols human reason”, but “de-sacralizes the whole cosmos in the name of the supremacy of man.” He goes on to say that:

The current concept of man as a self-centered creature not responsible to any authority beyond himself wielding infinite power over the natural environment can not but end in the aggression of man against himself and the world of nature.

For Nasr, it is “not possible to have true compassion for humanity while holding the dehumanizing view that people can be reduced to their physical abilities or their material input ... “To forget the Spirit and settle for its earthly reflections alone is to be doomed to the world of multiplicity, to separation, division and finally aggression and war.”

Modern science, as the author concedes, is responsible for some remarkable accomplishments. However, the immense failures of science must be clearly understood. Science must, by necessity, be confined to its own philosophical premises, which concern the nature of the objective or physical world. Although Nasr accepts that the world is in need of a sacred science pertaining to the material sphere, such a science must, in his view, be seen as part of a larger whole and can only derive from the perennial philosophy or “the sacred science of the Real.”

While not everyone will embrace Nasr’s traditionalist views in full, the author’s dazzling scholarship, spiritual insight and passionate concern carry an undeniable weight that is certain to expand and enrich the readers of this book.

Donna M. Brown