

# Finding Our Sacred Center in the Modern World: Interview with Laleh Bakhtiar

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



**P**rolific author and translator, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar (b. 1938), is an American-Iranian who is the Resident Scholar at Kazi Publications and is the President of the Institute of Traditional Psychology. She has a unique perspective as a licensed psychotherapist and one who is profoundly knowledgeable about the world's religious and spiritual traditions. She has translated and written some twenty-five books about Islam, many dealing with its inner dimension of Sufism, such as the *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (1976). She is the first woman to present a critical translation of the Qur'an into any language. Her English translation of the Qur'an is titled *The Sublime Quran* (2011), which has been chosen by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan (b. 1966) to appear on his website ([www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com)). She is a foremost interpreter of the Sufi Enneagram—she has written and presented extensively on this theme and has created a computer based training course. Dr. Bakhtiar is not only a scholar in these disciplines, but

is a Muslim and has been traveling the Sufi path for several decades. She has been privileged to have Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), pre-eminent Islamic philosopher and renowned scholar of comparative religion, as her mentor. She has taught courses on Islam at the University of Chicago, presents regularly at conferences throughout the world and is acknowledged as an authority on Islamic spirituality. This interview was conducted on Friday, April 25, 2014, in Vancouver, Canada, on the occasion of the second Sacred Web Conference.

**Samuel Bendeck Sotillos:** Many readers may not be familiar with your upbringing. Your mother was American and your father was Persian. Would you mind saying more about your unique upbringing and heritage and how the ideas of the East and West have shaped your perspective?

**Laleh Bakhtiar:** *In the Name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate.*

I grew up in America with my American mother as my parents divorced when I was quite young. However, while I was growing up in America, I always thought of myself as Persian. I had six older brothers and sisters. They had these beautiful Persian names. When I was born, my American grandmother said to my mother, “We cannot pronounce any of these names. Would you mind naming one of your children with a name we can pronounce?” So my mother named me “Mary,” after my aunt and “Nell” after my grandmother. I always felt that this did not suit me because here were six beautiful Persian names and everyone kept commenting on these beautiful names, yet my name did not reflect my cultural identity nor did it complement my last name.

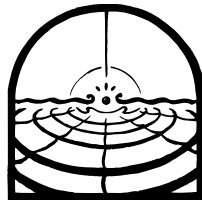
When I was nineteen I met a Bakhtiari Khan, head of a tribe, who was a friend of my mother. At our first meeting, my mother said to him, “She does not like her name Mary Nell. Can you please give her a new name?” He looked at me and said, “Laleh.” Laleh is the name of the opium poppy flower. So I now use that name as my professional name.

Once I was living in Iran and learning about the intellectual treasures unknown in the West, I realized that with my knowledge of English and with the Persian and Arabic that I had learned, I was in a position to bridge the gap. This has become my life’s work.

**SBS:** What led you to embrace the Islamic tradition and Sufism?

**LB:** When I first went to Iran with my former husband [Nader Arda-

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