

Book Review

Perennialist interpretation of modern Islam

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, New York: HarperCollins, pp472, 2012, PB, \$21.99

The author of this book is an Iranian-American academic. He is a University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University and a leading Muslim scholar who has published extensively on different aspects of Islam from a Traditionalist perspective. This book was first published in 2010 and has since been updated and expanded for the benefit of the readers. What is Traditionalism?

Like Rene Guenon (Abdul Wahid Yahya), Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad), Titus (Ibrahim) Burckhardt, Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din) and Charles (Hasan) Le Gai Eaton, Seyyed Hossein Nasr is an adherent and exponent of *Sophia Perennis* or the school of Perennial wisdom (for further details see chapter 12 of A. Faivre & J. Needleman's *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, London, 1993). Influenced by the religious ideas and thoughts of aforementioned scholars, mystics and writers, the author of this book provides an essentially Perennialist interpretation of Islam as a world faith, its teachings and practices.

According to Nasr, 'tradition' as used by "the traditionalists, the group that formed around the work of Rene Guenon that is rooted in the "perennial philosophy," this term implies both the Sacred as revealed to humanity through revelation and the

unfolding and development of that sacred message in the history of the particular human community for which it was destined; it implies both horizontal continuity with the Origin and a vertical connection that relates each moment in the development of the life of any single tradition to the metahistorical Transcendent Reality.” (p3)

In other words, according to the Perennialists, all the major world religions are equally authentic and therefore one is free to follow any one of them in order to achieve success in this life and salvation in the hereafter. Islam, according to the followers of Perennialism, is one of those authentic world faiths along with Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, etc. Such a view was first suggested by Rene Guenon, a French mystic and author, and it was subsequently developed by Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss Sufi writer, in his book titled ‘The Transcendent Unity of Religions’. Along with late Martin Lings and many others, Nasr is a close disciple of Schuon who he considers to be a highly gifted writer and practitioner of Sufism. Not surprisingly, most of Nasr’s books either provide an explanation or restatement of the Perennialist ideas and thoughts of Guenon and Schuon, two of the main founders of this mystical creed, otherwise known as the Traditionalist School.

Having already read the major writings of all the leading members of this group (including Guenon, Schuon, Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Nasr himself), I was half-expecting what Nasr has to say in this book. As it turns out, the contents of this book is almost entirely a reproduction of his old articles and essays published more than twenty years ago. Consisting of four parts, in the first, a number of contentious issues in the Muslim world are considered, while in part two the encounter of ‘traditional’ Islam and modernism is assessed, before the author looks at various issues of tension that exists between tradition, modernism and fundamentalism. The last part of the book consists of a short Postscript but four very extensive appendices (see pp259 to 402).

In the appendices, the author has provided a detailed evaluation of the life and works of Louis Massignon, a French Catholic Islamicist; Henry Corbin, who was also a leading French Islamicist; Rene Guenon, the founder of Perennialism and a French mystical writer; Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss Sufi and prolific writer; Titus Burckhardt, who was also a Swiss Sufi and artist, and Martin Lings, a British Sufi and prominent

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writer. Nasr wrote that the latter was born in Kent, UK (see page 395); this is clearly an oversight on his part as the late Dr Lings was born in 1909 in Burnage (located in Lancashire, UK).

All in all, this is an interesting book as it provides a Perennialist interpretation of modern Islam and in so doing it seeks to popularise the mystical ideas and thoughts of the 'Traditionalist' School.

M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide and is author of the widely acclaimed book, THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010; Kindle 2011), and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming, late summer 2012). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Member of English PEN and also a founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK. See www.bmri.org.uk

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