



Are All Religions the Same? Islam and the False Promise of Perennialism

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Martin Lings the perennialist

Most English-speaking Muslims are familiar with the biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ written by Martin Lings, entitled *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. A staple of book clubs, this book has rightly earned high praise for its readability, erudition, and narrative style.¹ Few Muslims, however, are familiar with Lings' other works. In one such book, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, Lings offers piercing insights on modern society that remain relevant today. He scathingly critiques evolutionary theory, freedom as a goal, and the very notion of progress. Some of the connections he makes are not only brilliant but beautifully expressed.²

However, any keen Muslim reader will quickly pick up on the fact that Islam is largely, though not entirely, absent from *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*. Instead, Lings grounds many of his critiques in Hindu and Christian theology.³ Rather than seeing these religious traditions as fundamentally contradicting Islam, Lings consistently downplays the differences between them and all religions, calling them a matter of “perspective,”⁴ or merely “manner[s] of expression.”⁵

This denial of religious difference is not a marginal element of Lings' work either. Lings regularly offers bold, sweeping statements such as “the truth that is expressed [by these religions] remains the same,”⁶ “all religions are in agreement

¹ “Scrupulous and exhaustive in its fidelity to its sources, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* is presented in a narrative style that is easily comprehensible, yet authentic and inspiring in its use of language, reflecting both the simplicity and grandeur of the story it tells.” Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2007), back cover.

² For example, Lings observes that the human search for spiritual transcendence has been symbolically replaced by space exploration as a materialist equivalent of going “up and beyond” (24), that humanism, by neglecting our spiritual potential, in fact entails the abolition of humanity (30), and that modern medicine, by neglecting the maladies of the soul, entails the abolition of health. Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (Cambridge: Arche Type, 2019), 31.

³ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 8, 15, 18–23, 32–33, 43, 47–48, 53, 56, 58–59.

⁴ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 15.

⁵ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 19.

⁶ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 19.

about what is really fundamental,”⁷ and “in its more general aspects orthodoxy [across religions] is always fundamentally the same.”⁸

In one telling passage, Lings writes:

...there tower up the great religions of the world—there is no need to mention their names—each like a vast mountain range with its snow-clad peaks of sainthood. Here and there also, in the background, loom the shadowy summits of a more primordial religion which had to be replaced or reaffirmed because its people, having fallen away from it, had forgotten it.⁹

The imagery of mountain ranges is extremely evocative, but also troubling. Is Lings merely pointing out the rudimentary belief that Islam is the final form of Allah’s guidance, meant to replace everything before it? Or is Lings advocating the perennialist position that Islam is merely one valid religion amongst others?

Lings’ words and imagery push the reader toward the latter interpretation. Islam, in his account, came to replace the mysterious primordial religion that is the basis of all contemporary religions, but *it did not come to replace all other religions*. The other ‘mountain chains’—Hinduism, Christianity, and beyond—also came to replace the lost primordial religion, and therefore are still valid paths today. As Lings would have it, all presently-existing religions have no right to claim themselves the absolute truth.

Perennial problems

Perennialism holds that there is one Truth that is found in multiple places. This distinguishes it from universalism, which holds that there is not one Truth but rather multiple truths. Because perennialism insists on one Truth, perennialists must engage multiple religious traditions and demonstrate that those traditions possess the same truth, at least in essence.

⁷ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 53.

⁸ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 63.

⁹ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 62.

This the perennialists did, but only by regularly omitting, ignoring, or reinterpreting any claim to exclusive Truth found in the religious traditions with which they engaged. When faced with features of a religion particularly difficult to reconcile with perennialism, perennialists emphasized the primacy of personal mystical experience over revelation and scripture. This is perhaps the main problem with perennialism: its utter indifference to revelation, sometimes bordering on antipathy.

By marginalizing revelation and scripture, perennialism simultaneously adopts a posture of validating Islam (and other religions) as true while rejecting everything that makes Islam unique, including Islam's own claim to exclusively and accurately representing God's truth and command. Islam in fact does have a discernible essence that is constituted by pillars of belief and practice necessary for salvation. Perennialism, however, claims that all religions are ultimately substitutable and therefore initiation into any of them is sufficient for salvation.

The thesis of perennialism thus contradicts Islamic teachings on salvific exclusivity and renders many features of Islam, if not the entire venture of Islam itself, superfluous. Allah says in the Qur'an,

Whoever seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him, and he shall be in the Hereafter among the lost.¹⁰

And, more explicitly,

But whoever opposes the Messenger, after guidance has been made clear to him, and follows a way other than that of the believers, We shall leave him on [the path] he has taken, and We shall cause him to burn in Hell—what an evil journey's end!¹¹

¹⁰ Qur'an 3:85.

¹¹ Qur'an 4:115; see also 48:13. These passages are more explicit since they undermine the claim that "Islam" in 3:85 is actually "lower-case islam," i.e., surrender to God in any form, not necessarily through the teachings of the last Prophet ﷺ.

Indeed, if all religions possess the same ultimate truth, why didn't the Last Prophet ﷺ teach that, instead of calling to Islam specifically? If the perennialist thesis is true, there would have been no need for the Prophet to separate himself and his followers as a distinct religious community; he could have simply joined the Quraysh and tried to discover the "kernel of truth" in their idolatry. Even if perennialists reject idolatry as outside of the one Truth, the Qur'an should still celebrate the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Original Sin as valid truths—as other perennialists, including Lings, have actually done.¹² Instead, Allah emphatically refutes and dismisses them.¹³

Contrary to perennialist illusions, Islam teaches that revelation and scripture are absolutely essential to right guidance. In fact, faking revelation and manipulating scripture—indeed, even speaking for God out of turn—is one of the most abominable sins. Allah says,

And who is more unjust than one who invents about Allah a lie or denies His verses? Indeed, the wrongdoers will not succeed.¹⁴

Perennialist authors are habitually guilty of this, even if some of them might be sincere in their attempt to defend Islam or accord it a special status. The reality is that perennialism attempts to side-step revelation and in its place artificially constructs a lowest common denominator of religious belief and practice. Perennialists were correct to posit a shared divine origin of all genuine revelation, but ultimately erred in trying to reconstruct that common thread through their own selective reading and motivated interpretations of religious traditions. Islam's central belief in *tawḥīd* is the real perennial truth, not the creative reconstruction of perennialists.

This paper contextualizes perennialism as a response to the problem of religious diversity—a response that relies heavily upon an exaggerated distinction between

¹² Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 56.

¹³ For refutations of original sin, see Qur'an 6:164, 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, and 53:38. For refutations of trinitarianism, see Qur'an 3:59, 4:171, 5:73, and 5:116.

¹⁴ Qur'an 6:21.

exoteric and esoteric religion—and evaluates this response in light of Islam’s own solution. It demonstrates that perennialism, far from being a universal esoteric truth, is actually a product of (modern) European thought formed in the wake of Christianity’s collapse and the emergence of the Enlightenment. It further shows that perennialists systematically mischaracterized foreign religious traditions, especially Islam, to bolster their thesis. Finally, it explores how secular tolerance, while having a different intellectual genealogy than perennialism, has conscripted perennialist ideas for its own goal of undermining Truth.

Defining perennialism, traditionalism, and universalism

Published in 2001, a mere four years before his death, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* likely represents Lings’ candid beliefs much more accurately than his prophetic biography, which was written decades earlier and constrained by the biographical genre from including much of Lings’ own thought.

Nevertheless, the trained eye can detect perennialist doctrines and interpretations even in Lings’ prophetic biography, as others have noted.¹⁵ Lings himself, despite formally denying the charge of perennialism, is no less than the editor of a volume titled *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy!*¹⁶

Lings’ understanding of Islam’s place among contemporary religions is not, therefore, indigenous to an Islamic worldview. Rather, it belongs to the philosophy of perennialism that Lings shared with his primary influences, René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon.

¹⁵ Abou Bilaal Mustafaa al-Kanadee, “Perennialist Poison in Martin Lings’ Biography of the Prophet,” <https://muslimanswersfiles.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/perennialist-poison-in-martin-lings-biography-of-the-prophet/>. See also G. F. Haddad, “A Critical Reading of Martin Lings’ *Muhammad: His Life Based On The Earliest Sources*,”

<https://britishmisk.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/52879411-critical-reading-of-martin-lings-gf-haddad.pdf>.

¹⁶ Martin Lings and Clinton Minnaar, *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007).

Technically, Guénon, Schuon, and Lings were Traditionalists, a philosophical movement for which perennialism is the main pillar. As historian Mark Sedgwick explains, “all Traditionalists are perennialists, but not all perennialists are Traditionalists.”¹⁷ Traditionalism combines perennialism with a critique of modernity and a historical narrative of decline that privileges the past as the location of truth and wisdom. Traditionalists would therefore reject New Age spirituality and syncretism, whereas non-Traditionalist perennialists would accept those movements as valid. Perennialism must also not be confused with universalism, which has a more subjective understanding of truth.^{18,19} In summary, universalism holds that there are multiple truths, perennialism holds that there is one truth found in multiple places, and traditionalism holds that there is one truth found in multiple places, but more easily and clearly found in the past. This essay will treat perennialism as a whole, in both its traditionalist and non-traditionalist forms.

The problem of religious diversity

Perennialism first arose during the Italian Renaissance as a response to the problems of religious diversity and alternative truth claims advanced by non-Christian peoples, particularly the ancient Greeks. To reformulate these theological problems as questions: how do we account for the existence of other religious groups if we believe ours alone holds the truth? And, how do we account for the fact that other religious groups have some teachings similar to our own? Rather than dismiss pre-Christian philosophers as pagans, Renaissance scholars including Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Agostino Steuco attempted to rehabilitate them as ancient theologians who taught and passed down “perennial wisdom” from the same divine source as Christian teachings.²⁰ The

¹⁷ Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 359.

¹⁸ “Universalism remains widely popular, though the term is not now widely used. People who read poems by Rumi or Kahlil Gibran at Christian funerals are universalists, whether or not they realize it. Universalism is the default position of many contemporary Westerners, even if that position is not often named.” Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 33.

¹⁹ In presenting a draft of this paper, I likened perennialism to an interlocutor who annoyingly insists that they are really saying the same thing you are, or that the differences between you are semantic, when in reality they are not actually agreeing with you and the differences between you are quite substantial.

²⁰ Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 27–29.

claim was not that pre-Christian philosophers were actually prophets who received the same revelation as Biblical prophets, but rather that they merely transmitted the same sacred knowledge. These early perennialists invented now discredited chains of transmission to explain how specific teachings made their way from the ancient world to their own time.²¹

If there were points of overlap between the teachings of Ancient Greece and Christianity, there were certainly points of departure, even contradiction. How to account for those? After all, the Ancient Greeks worshiped a multitude of deities, and Christian theologians at least understood themselves as monotheists. The next wave of perennialists writing in the early modern period, including Ralph Cudworth, William Warburton, and John Toland, proposed that such ancient peoples weren't *really* polytheistic, but that they merely encased their true, secret monotheistic teachings in a polytheistic shell for the sake of the ignorant masses and public order.²² This repurposing of an earlier distinction made in Greek philosophy between esoteric and exoteric teachings proved immensely significant for the viability of Perennialism. The exterior practice, the exoteric aspect of religion, was an incidental feature and could vary widely and even contradict other religions. The perennial truth, however, was not exoteric but esoteric, secretly and orally passed down to our present day. The distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric gave perennialist scholars the necessary room to dismiss teachings that contradicted their thesis and affirm others that coincided with it.

Perennialism thus began as a response to a specific theological problem. That response, however, is not credible. First, the chains of transmission offered by the earlier perennialists are now the object of scholarly ridicule. In order to save the thesis, perennialists deemphasized *how* the perennial philosophy was transmitted and instead emphasized *what* the perennial philosophy was. But this response is also unsatisfactory. For starters, the content of perennial philosophy differs little

²¹ “Ficino thus proposed a transmission of ancient theology from Moses and Zoroaster, to Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Iambliches (a follower of Plotinus), Pythagoras, and finally Plato. This chain of transmission makes no historical sense in terms of current knowledge, but seemed plausible in the fifteenth century.” Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 28.

²² Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 30–31.

from Neoplatonic philosophy.²³ Additionally, the deployment of the esoteric/exoteric binary to account for religious variety is riddled with problems: it assumes a remote, indifferent conception of God, underestimates the danger heresy poses to human salvation, downplays the importance of revelation, places too much burden on people to verify the truth of foreign religious traditions, underestimates how flawed transmission or well-meaning noble lies can alter or obscure the essential truth, and is generally too subjective in its content. These problems become glaringly apparent after reflecting upon how Islam accounts for religious variety.

Islam and religious diversity

Islam offers a far more credible solution to the problem of religious diversity, a solution that stresses the importance, nature, and history of revelation.

Islam teaches that Allah has goodwill, compassion, and mercy toward us and therefore wants salvation for us.²⁴ To this end, Allah expresses His care and goodwill through His guidance. The most important means by which He guides humankind is His speech communicated by prophets. Allah's uncreated speech is His direct instruction whereas His prophets delivered His speech to humankind and demonstrated its proper embodiment and application. These do not exhaust all the types of Allah's guidance—there are dreams and the felicity one attempts to observe after praying *istikhāra*—however, Allah's speech and His prophets are supreme and primary.

The ontological necessity and primacy of revelation leads to two consequences. One is that it creates an urgent imperative to distinguish between genuine and

²³ Specifically in that the universe emanated from a universal soul which emanated from an indescribable singular Divine being, with the purpose of life being to transcend and return towards the One through the practice of mysticism. See Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 18–23.

²⁴ These qualities are both the definition of Allah and consequences of who He is derived from His names, such as *al-Barr*, *al-Rahmān*, *al-Rahīm*, and *al-Hādī*.

fabricated revelation. If revelation is our primary conduit of guidance, sorting the true from the false becomes an urgent epistemological question. If you can confirm the revelation as genuine, you can confidently accept its teachings and apply them, even if they are counterintuitive or not to your liking. Within this configuration, false revelation is one of the greatest threats to our salvation because it stands to reroute our otherwise good intentions to follow the truth into a dead end of unwarranted worship and fruitless devotion.

The perennialist thesis begins with a poor opinion of God. It supposes that Divine guidance is not revealed to us directly and intermittently but has been transmitted secretly through a select few gurus from the distant past. Rather than creating an epistemological imperative to sort true from false revelation, the remote God of perennialism sends us out on a salvific scavenger hunt, leaving us to first guess what the perennial teachings are (or take the perennialists' word for it) and then search various traditions to discover them there. It is an implicit command to perform *istiqrā'* (exhaustive reading), but without the necessary tools or training to do so and therefore overburdens the truth-seeker while committing to an unreasonable optimism about the accurate transmission of ancient wisdom.

Setting aside the difficulties of searching for perennial truth outside one's native language, there is no mechanism within the perennialist configuration to verify or falsify one's assertion of the content of the perennial philosophy itself. There are only claims and evidence marshaled to prove them without a final arbiter or criterion to settle the matter. Accordingly, I could simply create a counter-perennial philosophy claiming that an anthropomorphic God (instead of Neoplatonism's ineffable One) was the perennial truth, or even the belief in no God at all. If one were to challenge my version of the perennial philosophy, I could resort to the same tactic as the perennialists and say that belief in God was just an exoteric feature of religions created for public order, whereas the esoteric truth was actually atheism. Indeed, this itself is not far from the materialist critique of religion.

The second consequence of the primacy of revelation in Islam is the recognition given to the danger of idolatry and other heresies. Perennialism downplays idolatry

as a mere exoteric feature devised for the public order, thus rendering the most hateful abomination in the sight of God and the most serious threat to human salvation a mere inconvenience that nonetheless serves functional purposes. This treatment, in addition to neglecting the existential threats of idolatry and heresy, fails to sufficiently account for the ways in which exterior practices are essential to facilitating internal states.²⁵ In other words, idolatrous practices and heretical beliefs cannot be limited to external or exoteric impact; they will necessarily damage one's internal state as well. There is no plausible scenario in which a person adheres to esoteric (presumably monotheistic) truth while embodying exoteric polytheism.

The anatomy of Revelation: Belief and practice

Islam resolves the problem of religious difference by first addressing the scope of the problem. Classical Islamic scholarship categorizes the linguistic content of revelation as either *khabr* or *inshā'*. *Khabr* signifies information about reality whereas *inshā'* represents instructions for what to do (or not to do) given the facts of that reality. This twofold distinction roughly corresponds to the fields of theology (*'aqīda*) and law (*sharī'a*). Significant religious diversity in the realm of *khabr/'aqīda* is inherently problematic since two contradictory things cannot simultaneously be true. Hell cannot both exist and not exist. Reincarnation and the *barzakh*, the actual vs. merely apparent crucifixion of Jesus cannot simultaneously be true. Therefore, significant religious diversity of this type always indicates that at least one party is in error and misguidance (or both are), and significant differences here are not legitimate.²⁶ What standard, then, do we use to evaluate the truthfulness of a claimant to revelation? Allah says that the ultimate mark of genuine revelation is that it calls to the same theology: *tawḥīd*.

²⁵ For more on the relationship between interiority and exteriority, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Minor differences can occur within certain limits, but this is outside the scope of this essay.

And We sent not before you any messenger except that We revealed to him that, “There is no deity except Me, so worship Me.”²⁷

Any purported revelation in which a prophet claims or is said to claim other than *tawḥīd* is categorically rejected as false, either because the claim was made by a false prophet or because a true prophet’s revelation was lost or corrupted after his death or disappearance.

And while it is true that significant diversity in this field indicates sure error, it is not conversely true that anything that agrees necessarily indicates timeless truth. This was a logical error into which the perennialists repeatedly fell. Lies can be held in common as much as truth can. Idolatry itself follows patterns and those patterns can be traced across eras and cultures.²⁸

With respect to *inshā’/sharī‘a*, religious diversity is not necessarily problematic. Legitimate differences result from the fact that Allah has granted each prophetic community a distinct *sharī‘a*. Allah says:

To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you...²⁹

This is not a universalist claim; rather it merely recognizes that *sharī‘a*, which is ultimately about human benefit (*maṣlaḥa*), is subject to change in ways that *‘aqīda* is not. Therefore, it need not be troubling or a sign of false revelation if different prophetic communities have different laws.³⁰ However, to have different teachings about God, the soul, the afterlife, etc. indicate a situation in which at least one party must be wrong.³¹

²⁷ Qur’an 21:25.

²⁸ For example, the ubiquity of a rain god or that divine beings can have offspring.

²⁹ Qur’an 5:48.

³⁰ Examples in the Quran include the Sabbath, which was legislated for the Jews but abrogated for Muslims. See Qur’an 4:47, 7:163, 16:124; 6:146; 3:49.

³¹ This is one of the most glaring flaws in Christian theology, namely that the idea of God supposedly preached by Jesus in the New Testament and canonized by Church authorities so starkly differs from the idea of God preached by

If we take revelation seriously enough to care about distinguishing genuine revelation from fabrication, we need a history of revelation and prophethood that accounts for the real observable differences that exist between religious belief and practice. The fact that revelation is easily lost and corrupted necessitates the commission of more prophets bringing new revelations (same *'aqīda*, different laws). The advent of a new prophet wipes the slate clean, leaving contemporaries responsible for following the new prophet's teachings rather than trying to reconstruct those that are lost to history. In this way there is a lot less guesswork in the Islamic account than in the perennialist one, since rather than optimistically relying on humans to pass things down across civilizations since time immemorial, Muslims rely on Allah to intervene in history with more revelation until that revelation is preserved, as is the case with the Qur'an.

What does this mean for the major world religions beyond those traditionally recognized as 'People of the Book'? Does this entail that the founders of these religious communities were false prophets because their scriptures are filled with teachings that directly contradict our own? Not necessarily. In the Islamic scheme there is an argument for the divine *origin* of the major world religions. We already know with certainty from the Qur'an that Judaism and Christianity began as valid religious communities established by Allah's true messengers, but that later the teachings were contaminated through the forgery and manipulation of scripture. It is possible that Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and others also began with one of Allah's messengers only to be later corrupted by human intervention.

Consider the following verse of the Qur'an,

And [We sent] messengers about whom We have related [their stories] to you before and messengers about whom We have not related to you. And Allah spoke to Moses with [direct] speech.

Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament. The doctrines of dispensationalism and progressive revelation implicitly recognize this problem.

Commenting on this verse, Dr. Al-Muthannā ‘Abd Al-Fattāh³² said that we can’t rule out the possibility that today’s world religions originated in genuine divine guidance. It is plausible that if the Gospel of ‘Isā could be so quickly and dramatically corrupted to justify the worship of Jesus, a similar process could have happened to Allah’s messengers sent further East about whom we have little reliable information. This distant but possible common divine origin could explain the loose similarities of certain features across religions such as prayer, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage, without resorting to the perennialist thesis that these loose commonalities prove that each religion possesses the same esoteric core and is valid as currently construed.

Perennialism as a European ideology

Implicit in perennialism’s insistence on divorcing esoteric truth from exoteric formality is contempt for religious authorities, organized religion, and official religious teachings. Today these sensibilities are immensely popular, perhaps even the default in many places. But sensibilities, no matter how seemingly self-evident, must come from somewhere. If we mine and probe our sensibilities, we can trace their genealogy—sometimes to surprising origins. The modern distrust of organized religion, orthodoxy, and religious authorities is not simply the wise voice of experience, nor is it a universal truth uncovered by the progress of reason. Rather, it results from a particular set of metaphysical commitments rooted firmly in European history and ideology.

Of course, a certain degree of epistemic humility is necessary and good. For example, in Islam we refrain from commenting on the final destiny of specific individuals unless we have a scriptural warrant to do so. When a fatwa is issued on a new issue, it is standard practice to end with “Allah knows best.” That is because Allah knows these things with certainty whereas we do not. Within European history, the Renaissance was also animated by a marked sensitivity to human

³² Dr. Al-Muthannā ‘Abd Al-Fattāh is a Professor of Qur’anic Exegesis (*tafsīr*) at the Islamic University of Madinah.

limitations.³³ Erasmus and Montaigne typified this attitude, the latter of which once famously remarked, “What do I know?”

But the equivocations of the Renaissance would later give way to full-blown skepticism when the Enlightenment took hold.³⁴ This shift can be attributed to the extremely consequential events that bridge the Renaissance and the Enlightenment: the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent European Wars of Religion.

According to British philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who wrote about the shifts in attitude that took place over this period,

In the High Middle Ages, Christian Theology...was more relaxed and adventurous than it became after the late 16th century...In short, the Church operated with an academic freedom that ceased to exist, once the Protestant and Counter-Reformation theologians were joined in confrontation. After the Council of Trent, ecclesiastical censors in Rome started to monitor the work of theologians in the Provincial Churches in a new way; the Holy Office, rooting out “heretics” in ways that are all too familiar, became more widespread and vigorous; and for the first time Catholic teaching hardened into theses (or “dogmas”) that were no longer open to critical discussion, even by sympathetic believers, and whose immutable truth it was politically indispensable to assert, for fear of yielding to the heresies of the Protestants. Instead of free-wheeling *Summas*, the 17th century was fed a diet of centrally authorized *Manuals*; and the Roman authorities began to intervene formally in moral theology by laying down general rulings about moral issues, or *responsa*, with the full force of authority... With the transition from *Summas* to *Manuals*, from speculative and revisable doctrines to immutable and infallible “dogmas,” theology and rationalism entered into an ambiguous alliance.³⁵

³³ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25.

³⁴ Wael Hallaq writes in *Restating Orientalism*: “Under the command of human reason finally divorced of traditional principles of morality, the project [of Enlightenment] would aim to create a universal civilization, one premised upon a particular notion of rationality, materiality, individualism, autonomy, and, crucial for us, domination of nature.” Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 36–37.

³⁵ Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 78.

This period of theological and ideological polarization had political consequences. Toulmin elaborates,

Despite all its turmoil and religious divisions, the 16th century had been, by comparison, a time when the voice of sweet reasonableness made itself heard, and was widely valued. From 1610 on, and most of all after 1618, the argument became active, bloody, and strident. Everyone now talked at the top of his voice, and the humanists' quiet discussions of finitude, and the need for toleration, no longer won a hearing.³⁶

The rest is history. Peaking with the 30 Years' War fought between 1618 and 1648, Europe would endure a deluge of religiously-motivated conflicts into the 1700s. The cost was astronomical; the 30 Years' War alone depleted parts of Germany of half their population.³⁷

It is difficult to overstate the impact of these religious wars on European attitudes toward organized religion, religious authorities, and official religious teachings. Whether the perpetrators of the violence were sincerely religious or merely using religion as an excuse is beside the point; the undeniable consequence was that people were sick of war and sick of absolutist religious claims used to justify war.³⁸

Alexander Pope, who lived in the immediate wake of these conflicts, captured this sentiment well when he wrote,

For forms of government let fools contest;
Whate'er is best administered is best;
For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight;
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right³⁹

³⁶ Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 79.

³⁷ Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years' War* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 210–11.

³⁸ While this history is important, it is also true that secular modernity exaggerates and exploits this historical memory to mythologize its own salvific role in European history. See William T. Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man," Epistle III, quoted in Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 131.

Indeed, the Enlightenment, which really got going in the immediate aftermath of the European Wars of Religion, is partly a story of how Europe responded to its own entrenched religious violence. Since theological certainty was now associated with political violence, the natural response was to ground certainty elsewhere, such as in human reason or empiricism.

Universalizing the European Christian experience

Christian institutions, authorities, and teachings became the prime target of the new skepticism. The door to this skepticism had already been cracked open by the Protestant Reformation, during which the theologian-led development of historical criticism, broke the Catholic Church's monopoly on valid scriptural interpretation. By the end of the European Wars of Religion, the door to skepticism had been blown off its hinges. Philosophical naturalism waited on the other side, and together with the breakneck pace of scientific discoveries only accelerated Christianity's decline.

European Christianity was at a crossroads, and the question everyone had to answer was: how much of pre-Reformation Christianity could people trust? The various reconfigurations of beliefs and religious identities that emerged during and after this period fell on a spectrum according to how one answered this question. Maintaining faith in Roman Catholicism represented complete trust in Western Christianity as received, whereas full-blown atheism meant completely rejecting it. The Mainline Protestant confessions and Anabaptist movements that emerged from the Reformation certainly fell closer to Catholicism than atheism, since they maintained that Christian revelation was basically true but that the Catholics had hijacked its interpretation and application. Meanwhile, the newly-popularized doctrine of deism—maintaining belief in a Creator but rejecting revelation—fell closer to atheism than Catholicism on the spectrum.

Perennialism provided another, ready-made alternative falling somewhere between deism and the Protestant confessions. Perennialism was closer to traditional

Christianity than deism in that it affirmed the phenomenon of revelation. However, rather than merely criticize the Church's interpretation of revelation, perennialists would claim that Christianity did not possess a monopoly on revelation, and that therefore Christianity, while valid and true, was not exclusively so. Perennialists were essentially willing to relinquish Christianity's claim to exclusive truth in exchange for the general validity granted to religion as a whole. This was a shrewd trade, insofar as it deflected the corrosive skepticism visited upon Christianity away from the category of religion itself.

That being said, perennialism enjoyed only limited appeal at first. Among the reasons for this was that perennialist arguments were not historically credible. Recall that perennialist thinkers emphasized the historical transmission of sacred knowledge at the expense of unique revelatory events, inventing imaginative paths of transmission between ancient civilizations. The same historical methods that allowed Protestant scholarship to attack the Catholic Church also discredited the transmission routes proposed by the Renaissance and early modern perennialists.

Perennialism would have to wait for the Traditionalists of the 19th century to solve this issue by shifting the focus away from *how* perennial truth made its way from place to place and instead focusing on *what* the perennial truth actually was.⁴⁰ Traditionalist perennialism also capitalized on growing disillusionment with Enlightenment rationalism, as its negative consequences—for example, environmental degradation—began to be felt at the same time that Eastern religious texts started to become more widely available in European languages. This puts Traditionalist perennialism in the same ranks as the other movements of what Isaiah Berlin calls the Counter Enlightenment. Among perennialism's intellectual peers were transcendentalism as well as German and English romanticism.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 45.

⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1–32.

Even if perennialism's roots stretch further back than early modern Europe, placing it on our spectrum of Christian disillusionment helps highlight its more relevant history as one of several European responses to the European Wars of Religion and the subsequent Enlightenment. Christianity was in retreat and every emerging movement was making decisions about where to lay the blame and what to salvage of Christianity. Whereas Protestants identified the Catholic Church as the problem, perennialists blamed Christianity's absolute and exclusive truth claims, which they saw as a chauvinistic attachment to their own exoteric forms and a failure to see the essential truth running through all religion. Traditionalist perennialists, mostly writing on the other side of the Industrial Revolution, also accused the Modern era of having strayed from ancient wisdom. To them, this was a universal problem, not merely a Christian one, and so they called on all religions to return to their roots and, presumably, what they had in common.

The distinction between critiquing Christianity versus critiquing religion as a whole is a crucial one with enduring import. Perennialists would not identify themselves as Christian, yet there's no denying that perennialism was historically tied to Christianity as one of several European responses "filling the gap after the collapse of Christian structures."⁴²

In an odd way, the perennialist critique actually takes the spotlight off Christianity itself, since addressing "religion" in general implies that all religions, or at least their exoteric forms, suffered from the same shortcomings that Christianity did. As Gil Anidjar has remarked, "Christianity made itself increasingly forgettable by foregrounding religion as a generic category and a target of criticism."⁴³

In this vein, some perennialists confessed a desire to save Europe and the West, providing a potential motive behind this overgeneralized critique. But for our purposes, the important takeaway was that disillusionment towards Christianity became experienced as disillusionment towards religion as a whole. French

⁴² Mark J. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 261.

⁴³ Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," 69, quoted in Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 55.

Orientalist and mystic De Pouvoirville summed this notion up when he said, “love religion, and distrust religions.”⁴⁴ De Pouvoirville, a perennialist, was implying that religion signifies the esoteric Truth whereas religions are the exoteric, partial, and imperfect attempts by humans to interpret, live, and propagate that Truth.

Martin Lings isn’t the only perennialist author whose claim to fame is a work not obviously identifiable with perennialism. Aldous Huxley, author of *A Brave New World*, was an ardent perennialist. He reproduces the typical perennialist criticisms of organized religion, religious authorities, and religious doctrine in his appropriately titled manifesto, *The Perennial Philosophy*. At one point, Huxley recounts ‘the allegory of ships,’ a Sufi tale in which Allah allegedly shows a mystic a vision in which there are ships sinking into the sea and mere planks floating on the water, which eventually sink as well. The mystic is told that those who attempt to ride the ships across the sea or cling to the planks will perish, but those who cast themselves overboard will be saved.⁴⁵

Commenting on this allegory, Huxley writes,

The allegory is fairly clear. The ships that bear the individual voyagers across the sea of life are sects and churches, collections of dogmas and religious organizations. The planks which also sink at last are all good works falling short of total self-surrender and all faith less absolute than the unitive knowledge of God.⁴⁶

The main takeaway here is that sects and churches, dogmas and religious organizations are to be treated with categorical suspicion. They obscure the Truth and obstruct the right path rather than elucidating it and facilitating the journey upon it. Note again how what began as a criticism of Christianity specifically has been scaled up to apply to religion as a whole.

⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Le sens caché selon René Guénon* (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1975), 53.

Eugène-Albert Puyou de Pouvoirville was also initiated in Encausse’s Martinist Order. See also Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 58.

⁴⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 210.

⁴⁶ Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*, 210.

Perennialism did not necessarily cause the skepticism of organized religion, religious authorities, and official religious doctrine so rampant today. However, it represented a readily available framework to which more and more people resorted as Christianity declined and Enlightenment-style skepticism ascended. Perennialists of the Traditionalist and non-Traditionalist variety not only attracted people already disillusioned with traditional forms of religiosity, they actively facilitated and furthered suspicion of “organized religion.”

Perennialism’s conscripts

It is significant that Huxley resorted to Sufism to make his point. Huxley was following the perennialist playbook of mischaracterizing foreign religious traditions by cherry-picking statements and concepts that seemed to support perennialist positions, thus making those positions seem more universally held than they really were.

In *Ancient Beliefs*, Lings manages—in the space of one short paragraph—to marshal the concept of reincarnation in Hinduism, Original Sin in Christianity, and *fiṭra*, or innate disposition, in Islam as evidence that human beings come into this world with a responsibility that predates their birth.⁴⁷ This misappropriation of the *fiṭra* clearly contradicts Islamic teachings on the fundamental innocence of children and the uninheritable nature of sin.⁴⁸

Another example can be found in the work of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, a key early collaborator of René Guénon and fellow perennialist. Originally an art historian, Coomaraswamy wrote a book titled *Hinduism and Buddhism* which attempted to make the case that both religions were expressions of the original Perennial Philosophy.⁴⁹ The book was pilloried in academic circles. One reviewer

⁴⁷ Lings, *Ancient Beliefs*, 56.

⁴⁸ Importantly, Allah accepts Adam’s repentance. Qur’an 2:37.

⁴⁹ In yet another example, Guénon’s collaborator Ivan Gustaf Aguéli wrote an article “on the doctrinal identity of Taoism and Islam” for *La Gnose*, a journal they worked on together. See Robin Waterfield, *René Guénon and the Future of the West: The Life and Writings of a 20th-Century Metaphysician* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2002), 30.

wrote in *The Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, “any interpretation motivated by such a fixed idea tends to force etymologies and meanings on words and passages in order to make them conform to a preconceived idea.”⁵⁰

Lings and Coomaraswamy both follow Guénon in this respect, whose doctoral thesis, later published as *A General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, was rejected for being similarly ahistorical and ideologically motivated.⁵¹ Consider the positivist nature of the academy at the time and you get a true sense of just how far off the mark they were to provoke this accurate, if ironic, critique.⁵²

Perennialists not only mined religious traditions for evidence that justified their own philosophy, they adopted the incredibly arrogant posture that they understood these religious traditions better than the vast majority of practitioners of those traditions. Realizing that they had to account for the discrepancy between their own interpretations and those of the native masses, perennialist thinkers often leaned on their aforementioned inheritance of European anti-clericalism. Like Huxley with his allegory of the ships, the masses were getting it wrong, clinging to exclusionary creeds and institutions that were in fact the production of the clerical establishment, not the Religion itself. In other words, whenever a religion seemed to espouse teachings that claimed exclusive access to the Truth or to salvation, it could be blamed on either the folly or manipulation of rigid clerics. The perennialists, always, were in touch with the real Truth.

As previously noted, perennialists also relied heavily on their distinction between the exoteric shell of religion whose purpose was public order and the esoteric or mystical forms of religion more amenable to the perennialist narrative. Perennialist authors regularly championed their preferred mystical strains and summarily

⁵⁰ Walter E. Clark, “Review of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 1944), 63–70. Quoted in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 35.

⁵¹ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 22.

⁵² Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 22.

dismissed the rest, propping them up as the true representatives of tradition and the only ones that should be trusted.⁵³

As far as Islam is concerned, perennialists like Huxley eagerly seized upon Sufism as their point of entry to mischaracterize Islam and to that end even attempted to paint Sufism as a separate religion distinct from Islam. Sufism and Islam have been treated as two empty signifiers, the former upon which Western minds could project their own religious ideals and the latter upon which they could project their religious fears, again largely informed by Europe's traumatic experience with Christianity. One need look no further than the vast discrepancy between the Western imagination and actual reality of Sufi poets such as Rumi to appreciate this point.⁵⁴ This is not to say that the actual Rumi can and must be upheld as the epitome of orthodox Islam. Rather, the point is simply to draw attention to the unfaithful and inaccurate ways in which perennialists and their contemporaries engaged, interpreted, and conscripted foreign religious texts and figures toward their own ends. Rumi's words are instructive here:

A wretch steals the words Sufis spoke,
and tells tall tales to simple folk.
The work of real men will shine bright,
the vile have shameless tricks—not light.⁵⁵

Revisionist traditions

The conscription of older traditions in novel ways continues today, albeit in subtler ways. One widely-conscripted tradition in modern times is the story of “The Blind Men Who Touch the Elephant.” Sarah Conover has collected and adapted dozens of ancient stories from different traditions and published them in a series of books,

⁵³ This is a nearly ubiquitous feature of Perennialist writers, including Guénon, his biographer Waterfield, Lings, Schuon, Huxley, and beyond. The same figures and movements are repeatedly marshaled: Vedanta from Hinduism, Eckhart and Merton from Christianity, Ibn ‘Arabī and Rumi from Islam, etc. There is rarely a serious treatment of the traditions within Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity that contradict the perennialist narrative constructed from these sources.

⁵⁴ See, for example, <https://www.rumiwasmuslim.com/>.

⁵⁵ Rumi, *Masnawi*, bk. 1, pt. 11, trans. @sharghzadeh, <https://www.rumiwasmuslim.com/translations>.

one of which—*Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs*—might be familiar to Muslim readers. Other titles in the series include *Kindness*, a collection of Buddhist stories, and *Harmony*, a collection of stories from China. Conover retells the story of “The Blind Men Who Touched the Elephant” in the latter book, *Harmony*. Like many ancient stories, it began with a troubled king:

This particular king was a follower of the Buddha, and he studied the sacred books and meditated every day. But in his kingdom at that time many other religions also drew followers. In the parks and markets, in the temples and schools, arguments erupted between defenders of different philosophies. Some people believed that they alone understood life’s deepest secrets, while others held opinions that were exactly the opposite. Consequently, the king’s subjects argued day and night.⁵⁶

Leaving aside the conflation of religion and philosophy, Conover’s modern rendition lays blame on religious difference, and above all theological certainty, for conflict and discord. Believing that you are correct to the exclusion of others brings unnecessary division, we are being implicitly told.

The king decided to teach his subjects a sagacious lesson. He summoned several men who had been blind since birth and had an elephant brought to them. Then he called all the subjects of his kingdom to the town square to watch the ensuing spectacle. The king asked the blind men,

“Do you want to know what an elephant looks like?”

“Yes!” they replied in one voice.

“But you cannot see it, so how will you learn what it is like?” asked the king.

“We will feel it!” one man replied.

“We will touch it,” said another.

“We will hear it,” said a third.

⁵⁶ Sarah Conover and Chen Hui, *Harmony: A Treasury of Chinese Wisdom for Children and Parents* (Spokane: Eastern Washington University Press, 2008), 16.

The men slowly approached the elephant and began touching it. Each of them grabbed on to a different part of the elephant, so the descriptions they reported back to the king were vastly different. If that weren't enough, in Conover's rendition the blind men mocked the other descriptions of the elephant, each insisting that he alone was right. The crowd looked on, amused and ready to receive the lesson from the king, who finally said, "Those of you who don't follow the teachings of the Buddha also seem to be quite convinced that you alone grasp the nature of life... and you want to argue on and on about it... Do you now understand that you are just as confused as these quarreling blind men who know only a small part of the elephant yet are so certain of the whole?"⁵⁷

Storytelling is powerful not because of what is stated, but because of what is implied. In Conover's rendition, those who claimed certain metaphysical truths are likened to the blind. Here, claims of certain belief are blameworthy because they are a categorical impossibility, only creating division and strife. If the chief mouthpieces of metaphysical certainty are organized religion, religious authorities, and religious doctrine, then those mouthpieces are guilty of spreading division and conflict.

Conover's retelling of this story, the conflation of religion and philosophy, and indeed the concept of the book series as a whole, have distinctly perennialist undertones. In Lings' language, the entire elephant would represent the towering, shadowy mountain chain of primordial truth whereas the observations of the blind men are today's world religions, Islam included among them.

But stories are open to interpretation, and upon further inspection this story might be an indictment of perennialism rather than an argument for it. Notice the means by which the blind men endeavor to know the elephant: their senses. The story demonstrates the limits of empirical knowledge, but it would be premature to assume that the same conclusion applies to knowledge of revelation. We assume we are the blind men of the story—but are those with genuine revelation from a prophet more like the blind men, or more like the king who can see the whole

⁵⁷ Conover and Hui, *Harmony*, 19.

elephant and thus assess the descriptions of others? Perhaps, then, the story should be retold as demonstrating the need to submit to the guidance of a prophet who knows the unseen rather than those who, like perennialists, dubiously claim to speak for all religions. Perhaps the perennialists are, in fact, the blind men.

A similar attitude toward religion is found in the popular children's book, *Old Turtle*. Winner of the 1993 American Booksellers' Children's Book of the Year, *Old Turtle*'s basic plotline is that all the creatures of the earth lived in harmony with one another until they started arguing about God. Each animal described God in a way that echoed their own particular experience, and their arguments are only ended when the sage-like Old Turtle authoritatively tells everyone that God is everything that they describe and more. The story goes on to foretell the coming of humans, the initial period of harmony they would enjoy, and then their own devolution into arguing about God, followed by subsequent war and ecological disaster. Harmony will be restored, Old Turtle tells us, when people stop arguing about God and learn to see God in each other.⁵⁸

While not mentioning religion explicitly, it is clear that religion—as an enterprise that delimits what God is and is not, that makes truth-claims about the Divine—comes into Old Turtle's crosshairs. We can't really say anything definitive about God, Old Turtle tells us, and if we try, we must immediately realize that what we say isn't more valid than what anyone else could say. As in Conover's modern rendition of ancient tales, to think otherwise is to invite not only conflict, but disaster.

The themes animating these stories are popular enough in contemporary society to be cliché. Organized religion, orthodoxy, and religious authorities are treated with profound suspicion, even ridicule. But is this really ancient wisdom, or simply a modern posture?

⁵⁸ Douglas Wood and Cheng-Khee Chee, *Old Turtle* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2001).

Religious experience and the “playlist-ification” of faith

From the very beginning, perennialism sidelined scripture by emphasizing the transmission of ancient wisdom at the expense of intermittent revelation and prophetic intervention. It further marginalized scripture by deploying the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy, by which perennialists could easily dismiss even scriptural content that violated the perennialist thesis. In its place perennialists emphasized the primacy of personal mystical experience for uncovering Truth. Showing how this feature goes back to Neoplatonism, Mark Sedgwick writes,

The result of this spiritual process was the mystical experience: homoiosis to theo for Plotinus, fana for the Sufis, “union” for other purposes. And one result of union, according to Plotinus’s later follower Iamblichus, was that one who had achieved homoiosis could access and communicate divine knowledge.⁵⁹

The key point here is the idea that union grants the practitioner unique access to divine knowledge. Orientalists in general and perennialists specifically sought out even superficially similar concepts in other traditions as a convenient avenue to undermine more identifiable forms of adherence to organized religion, its authorities, and doctrines.

In the contemporary Western context our concern is not so much that mystical experience has been overemphasized but rather the fact that one’s personal experience of religion has been so infused with a quasi-mystical authority that it is seen as being more authentic and true than Divine revelation itself. As one non-Muslim college student put it to me bluntly, “I don’t want an external religious authority to tell me that my spiritual experience isn’t ok.”

⁵⁹ Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 252.

This shift contributes to an emergent sentiment among Muslim youth that they benefit from other religious traditions and spiritual practices in ways that displace or marginalize Islamic ones. Some people claim to benefit more from yoga and meditation than from *ṣalāt*, despite the latter's lofty and unambiguous status as the preeminent expression of gratitude in our sacred law. To privilege practices not directly communicated by our Creator nor by the best of creation belies a personal disposition that values personal experience over revelation. Scripture here receives the same dismissive wave of the hand as organized religion.⁶⁰ As we have seen, however, it is not "organized religion" as a whole that is problematic but the specific way in which the Christian church was organized and wielded power. Realizing that European religious experience is particular rather than universal enables us to think about religion in a much more nuanced way than the crude binary of organized/not organized. Now we can ask: "Who is doing the organizing?" Or, "by what principles and methods is my religion being organized?" We do ourselves no favors by railing against "organized religion" as a whole when our problem is really something more specific, such as the ecclesiastical authoritarianism of European Christianity. In fact, we set ourselves up to overcorrect to the other extreme.

Convictions and commitments have to be organized by someone and in some manner. No one's convictions and commitments are random; even if people style themselves "spiritual but not religious," there is still a structure beneath the surface that organizes those commitments. Being "spiritual," then, does not describe a space that is outside of religious organization but rather a situation in which *the practitioners themselves* have assumed responsibility for organizing their own beliefs and practices.

Put in these terms, the potential unforeseen problems in organizing your religious practice for yourself become clearer. One of the main issues is avoiding confirmation bias. A relative of mine once told me, "I don't need to go to church to

⁶⁰ For data on the rising phenomena of "the nones" and "SBNRs," see <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/> and <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/10/513>.

worship God.” That might be technically true, but if you don’t have the input of a third party, someone outside of yourself, how can you be sure that you’re not creating an echo-chamber of all the affirming messages you want to hear while avoiding the messages that challenge you to take accountability and grow? Or, if you skew more self-critical, what’s to say you’re not surrounding yourself with crippling messages confirming your own poor self-perception instead of messages that will build you up? In its suspicion of organized religion, perennialism has overestimated the ability of the individual to fairly and holistically organize their own spiritual practice.

Social media algorithms provide a helpful illustration. Scrolling through our feeds, we might feel like we’re in control, even be impressed with the amount of material to which we have access. But we don’t see the way that the algorithm uses our own preferences to limit our exposure to things we’ll never know about. When we take responsibility for organizing our own religious and spiritual practices the result is a sort of ‘playlist-ification’ of faith where our own preferences and desire for affirmation (or self-critique) might preclude our exposure to what we really need spiritually.

A trend toward rediscovering the importance of the body (after being marginalized by the hyper-rational Enlightenment) has further buttressed these sensibilities. Books like *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk are serial best-sellers, paying long overdue attention to the effects of trauma and taking the body seriously in an epistemic way.⁶¹ But, as with every swing of the historical pendulum, we need to make sure that we maintain balance instead of oscillating from one extreme to the other. The fact that there are limits to what the body can sense and experience should give us a healthy amount of uncertainty about the capacity of personal experience to reveal Divine truths.

⁶¹ For an important critique of *The Body Keeps the Score*, see Kristen Martin, “‘The Body Keeps the Score’ Offers Uncertain Science in the Name of Self-Help. It’s Not Alone,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com/books/2023/08/02/body-keeps-score-grieving-brain-bessel-van-der-kolk-neuroscience-self-help/.

There is a Chinese saying that reflects this reality: “He mistakes the reflection of a bow in the cup for a worm.” It refers to an old story about a guest being served tea by his host. Looking down into his cup, the guest noticed what he thought was a worm in his cup, but not wanting to offend his host, he drank the contents of the cup anyway. The guest returned home but couldn’t stop worrying about having swallowed the worm. Sure enough, the next day he awoke and felt horrible nausea and fever. He lay in bed ill for days until the friend who had served him the tea came to pay him a visit. The ill man confessed that there had been a worm in his teacup that day and that he had swallowed it to avoid seeming like a bad guest. His friend was surprised and rushed home to see if there were really worms in his tea. Once he poured up a cup, however, he realized that there were no worms— only his bow, hanging on the wall, being reflected in the contents of the teacup. He rushed back to his friend to tell him the good news, and upon learning the reality of what had transpired, his symptoms vanished instantly.⁶²

This story is not a justification for gaslighting or denying the experiences of others, but it is a recognition that the body, and thus experience, has limits. Put another way, there is truth in the body, but the body does not hold a monopoly on the truth. If there were no truth outside the self, religion would in fact be useless.

There is also an irony at play here: if we shun, as perennialism would have us do, organized religion and religious authorities because we are suspicious of others’ religious interpretations, what makes us so confident in our own? Such one-sided skepticism could only make sense if we assume that others misinterpret scripture solely because of their ill intent or the positions of power and privilege from which they speak. But there are other factors behind religious misinterpretation, such as delusion, conflicts of interest, and wishful thinking. More importantly, if religious authorities are not immune to these forces, what makes us think that we are? We have to face the sober fact that we are not immune, that the factors behind

⁶² <http://www.admissions.cn/culture/349792.shtml>. This is known as the “nocebo” effect, the opposite of the better-known placebo effect. For more information, see <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/is-the-nocebo-effect-hurting-your-health>.

misinterpretation are not just political and historical, they are also moral and could happen to anyone. Perennialism does not meaningfully deal with this reality.

Islam occupies the middle ground when it comes to the capacity of human experience to arrive at Divine Truth. On the one hand the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, when asked about the nature of sin, replied that one should ask their own heart.⁶³ The Prophet ﷺ also referred to experiencing the “sweetness of faith,” a nonsensical notion if our personal experience counted for nothing.⁶⁴

That being said, there are important warnings about the limits of human experience. Allah says,

But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not.⁶⁵

Allah also tells us that the Devil is so successful precisely because he makes the evil seem good. Allah says that Iblīs says,

“And I will mislead them, and I will arouse in them [sinful] desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah.” And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss. Satan promises them and arouses desire in them. But Satan does not promise them except delusion.⁶⁶

These verses demonstrate the need for an authority outside ourselves to help regulate our experiences, organize our religious practice, and keep us in check. Without such checks, what we experience as spiritual development might be in reality self-destruction. Despite the claims of secular academics, religion is not primarily a human venture, but rather a divinely communicated regimen of internal states and external practices that are registered by the Creator as valid expressions

⁶³ *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 18028.

⁶⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6941.

⁶⁵ Qur'an 2:216.

⁶⁶ Qur'an 4:119–20.

of gratitude. The concept of love languages is instructive here; just as I can waste my time, money, and effort buying flowers for an allergic spouse, I can toil away at something I believe (or experience) is worshiping my Creator only for Allah to tell me in the afterlife that it in fact was not worship—not a valid expression of gratitude—at all.

There is a role, certainly, for our subjective experience *within* worship, to taste the sweetness of faith, to stand in awe of the Creator, to worship as if we are witnessing Allah. But we must not mistake the sublime experience of worship as an end in itself. It is but a means to an end: paradise and Allah’s approval. When we prioritize the *experience* of worship over the *object* of worship, our own experience of worship becomes an end in itself, perhaps even to the point where we are willing to leave the firm footing of Islam to chase a sublime experience elsewhere, and thus actually center the ego and its experience rather than the Creator. Surely there are cautionary tales in self-styled gurus and false prophets throughout history. Consider Frithjof Schuon’s esoteric visions of the Virgin Mary. It’s worth quoting Sedgwick, who is drawing from Schuon’s own journals and correspondences to note Schuon’s internal justifications for his descent into misguidance.

Schuon was not sure at first how to interpret his experiences of 1965. The first question was whether they amounted to a true or a false vision. A true vision, Schuon decided, could be distinguished from a false one by the beneficial effect it had on its recipient, and this vision had the beneficial effect of freeing him from the love of books, newspapers, and the theater, in which he found he could no longer lose himself. Schuon did not consider, in this context, another effect of his vision: the “almost irresistible need to be naked like her [the Virgin Mary’s] baby.” For some time thereafter, Schuon took off his clothes whenever he was home alone.

Once Schuon decided that his experiences were a true vision, the next question was how to interpret them. His final conclusion was that the vision marked the coming of “a special relationship with Heaven.” “[...] It seems clear that Schuon took it as a change in his role from being shaykh of the

Alawiyya (the position given him in his earlier vision of 1937) to a more universal role, above and beyond Islam.⁶⁷

Schuon's later abominations include painting the Virgin Mary naked, multiple sexual indecencies,⁶⁸ and a slew of cult-like antics.⁶⁹ His treatment of the Virgin Mary and subsequent philandering proved scandalous to even his fellow perennialists, exacerbating the earlier split between Schuon and René Guénon. If subjective experience is our main guide, the Devil is right next to us ready to delude us.

In our Islamic tradition there is a famous story involving Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī in which he experiences what seems at first to be a mystical vision. Clouds gather and from the great beyond comes a booming voice declaring that it is none other than Allah Himself, and that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī had reached such an advanced spiritual state that he was now permitted to do what was impermissible for everyone else. The Shaykh immediately spat in disgust and cursed the voice, which then revealed itself to actually be the Devil. In one version of the story, the Devil notes his surprise in being exposed, having fooled countless scholars and worshipers before al-Jilānī.⁷⁰

Indeed, experience can only take us so far before it becomes prone to delusion. One of Allah's names is *al-Ḥaqq* because He is the Ultimate Reality and the most reliable source of guidance for what is Real. With both our engagement with religious texts and our interpretation of our own experiences, we need an outside authority to keep us honest and prevent our own biases from leading us down the road of self-indulgent destruction. Indeed, the name of our religion—chosen by Allah, not us—is submission, Islam.

Perennialism conscripted

⁶⁷ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 150–51.

⁶⁸ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 153.

⁶⁹ Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 173–74.

⁷⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JK75qZ6qGZk>.

Although diverging in important ways, Perennialism has been both amplified and conscripted by another, more powerful and dominant ideology that also originated in Renaissance Europe: secularism. Initially a term to describe the transition from monastic life to the life of canons, and then the transfer of ecclesiastical property to lay persons, secularism eventually emerged as one of several hegemonic political projects of modernity that radically reconfigured the way much of humanity experiences life on earth.⁷¹

One such transformation was the displacement of previous religio-social identities with a transcendent political identity. This shift is why much of the world thinks and identifies primarily with the nation-state and its category of citizen and only secondarily with the *ummah*, Christendom, or some other community of souls. Perennialism makes a similar move, but rather than substituting a political category for a religious one, it substitutes one transcendent spiritual identity for another, supposedly *more* transcendent spiritual identity.

French Occultist Gérard Encausse summed up this sentiment well when he said,

Truth is One, and no school, no religion can claim it for itself alone...In every religion can be found manifestations of the single truth.⁷²

Perennialism thus styles itself as a meta-faith, a transcendent truth that trumps the supposedly transcendent (but in its own estimation parochial) truths of other religions.

In claiming neutrality, secularism and perennialism mask both their historical embeddedness and particular regime of metaphysical commitments. Both are heavily indebted to the European Enlightenment, though secularism more so. Perennialism historically depends on Enlightenment-style skepticism to clear the

⁷¹ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁷² Gérard Encausse founded the Martinist Order, in which Guénon was initiated. Quoted in Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47.

field of other claimants to transcendent truth, but its actual content is Neoplatonist metaphysics repackaged.

Secular power forces religions to change in the process of transcending them and rendering them governable. Perennialism, too, mutilates other faith traditions in its act of transcendence. In order to maintain the thesis that there actually is a common esoteric core running through all religions, perennialism must excise those inconvenient tenets and practices that contradict its thesis, usually deploying the charge of exotericism to dismiss them.

This, in addition to perennialism's marginalization of revelation and scripture at the expense of individual religious experience, also folds nicely into the secularist, materialist conception of the self, with beliefs conceptualized as non-essential, substitutable, and thus discardable. Similarly, the perennialist emphasis on the transmission of sacred knowledge rather than its revelation through Prophets resembles the secularist assumption that religion is a human venture rather than a divine one.

In its depiction of exotericism as an incidental rather than essential feature of religion and salvation, perennialism taps into the skepticism and disdain for religious authority, organized religion, and orthodox teachings that it shares with secularism.

Secularism's will to transcendence was supposedly meant to facilitate political stability and governability by discovering an agreeable lowest common denominator. Perennialism makes a parallel move, searching out the lowest common denominator of religious belief and practice, and in the process watering down and depoliticizing its notion of truth. This neutered vision, in turn, provides secularism with an important tool for neutralizing rival claimants to transcendent truth and alternative transcendent political imaginations. The perennialist project of lending theological legitimacy to other religions sits comfortably adjacent to liberal political values of tolerance, inclusion, and multiculturalism. Indeed, perennialism, in addition to universalism, postmodernism, and other ideologies that undermine

alternate claims to ultimate truth, are actually key conscripts of secularism allowed to flourish in order to undermine its Others.

Accordingly, perennialists are more common than you think, especially in academia. Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are perennialists. Julius Evola, Aleksandr Dugin, and King Charles III are perennialists. Even Jordan Peterson is a perennialist.⁷³ Perennialist ideas and sensibilities are even more nearly ubiquitous in North American religious culture. Remember that from the European experience, theological certainty and exclusivity is a powerful trigger, one that is assumed to result in political violence and oppression.⁷⁴ There is a real concern shared by many that in order to successfully tolerate others, we must accept as valid their theology too. Thankfully, Islam can disentangle these concerns.

Will the real perennial truth please stand up?

For all their shortcomings, the perennialists sensed something important, that there is a degree of commonality between the major religions of the world and that such commonality plausibly indicated a common Divine rather than human source. However, they sorely missed the mark in identifying what that common thread was and interpreting what it meant.

The perennialists latched onto the thread of mysticism as the common essence of all religions. To make this tenable, however, they had to actively downplay the fundamental and unresolvable differences between religions, emphasizing instead the divide between exoteric and esoteric religion. In latching onto the latter, the perennialists were victims of their own inherited sensibilities, distinctly European,

⁷³ “He has described himself as a Traditionalist, however, and the conclusions that he drew from Eliade’s understanding of myth are comparable to those drawn by Traditionalists who did draw explicitly on Guenon, Evola, and Schuon . . . Peterson’s perennialism is as agnostic as Eliade’s. He sees myth as a repository of human wisdom rather than as the product of any sort of revelation. Rather than investigating myth himself, he relies largely on Eliade’s account.” Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 59.

⁷⁴ For an excellent treatment of this subject, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

that cast a skeptical eye on organized religion, religious authorities, and religious doctrine.

Even more problematic was the Traditionalist interpretation that all contemporary religions were imperfect but valid manifestations of the lost primordial religion. This interpretation suffered from a major oversight: the assumption that all current religions only possessed mere remnants of the truth. This was true of Christianity, but Traditionalists assumed that what was true of Christianity was true of all religions. Rather than do their due diligence to determine if there was in fact a religion that properly preserved the Original Teachings, they painted all traditions with the same brush and pivoted to the idea of a lost primordial one.

The real primordial religion is, and always was, Islam. The common thread that the perennialists were searching for but failed to find is in fact *tawḥīd*. Allah says,

And We sent not before you any messenger except that We revealed to him that, “There is no deity except Me, so worship Me.”⁷⁵

Rather than downplay the often fundamental and mutually exclusive differences between the religions we see practiced today, Islam acknowledges and accounts for them,

And those who were given the Scripture did not differ except after knowledge had come to them—out of jealous animosity between themselves.⁷⁶

These man-made differences, joined with the regional character of earlier prophetic missions, necessitated the commission of subsequent prophets to bring the people back to the primordial teaching of *tawḥīd*. If at any point in time human communication became global *and* the Divine communication was preserved, there would be no justification for any more Divine revelation or prophets.

⁷⁵ Qur'an 21:25.

⁷⁶ Qur'an 3:19.

Christianity is the first world religion in the true sense, spread (often violently) in a significant way to every continent. However, the message given to Prophet Jesus (as) was lost, necessitating the prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ. Allah preserved the Qur'an in a way no other Divine revelation was preserved, making it the standard for understanding the Creator's wishes, replacing the remnants of what came before it, and slamming the door shut on future prophets or Divinely revealed scriptures. Allah said,

And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth.⁷⁷

Hence, Islam is the only acceptable religion to Allah, as He says explicitly,

And whoever desires other than Islam as religion—never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers.⁷⁸

This is precisely why the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ criticized the Companion and second Rightly Guided Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb for reading the Torah, declaring that if Moses had been alive at that moment he would have had no choice but to follow Muhammad.⁷⁹ This is also why Allah stressed that the Christians and the Jews living at the time of the Prophet ﷺ would have to follow him in order to be guided, saying,

So if they believe in the same as you believe in, then they have been [rightly] guided; but if they turn away, they are only in dissension, and Allah will be sufficient for you against them. And He is the Hearing, the Knowing.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Qur'an 5:48.

⁷⁸ Qur'an 3:85.

⁷⁹ *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 14736; graded fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Albānī.

⁸⁰ Qur'an 2:137.

Recall that perennialism emerged from the ruins of a collapsing Christianity and thus was indelibly marked by the problems of an increasingly post-Christian Europe. As Muslims, post-Christian problems do not have to be our problems. We do not need to accept the coupling of theological certainty with political violence. In fact, we can draw on our own tradition to teach others that it is possible to be certain of one's religious beliefs and categorically reject the beliefs of others, yet still live side by side in relative peace and harmony.

A large segment of the North American Muslim population migrated from non-European lands within living memory. We can't lose sight of the fact that settling in any new place also entails stepping into a conversation of ideas, often contentious, that predates our presence. We have to pay careful attention to infer what was said in the conversation before we arrived, to understand the things that brought the conversation to its current point.

If you walked in on two people engaged in heated debate, it wouldn't make much sense to hastily enter the fray and support one side over the other. Doing so would preclude the possibility of ending the debate in a more amicable way, especially if you as an outside observer were in possession of some insight that could help both parties. As Muslims, joining the chorus against organized religion, religious authorities, and religious doctrines would be premature and a missed opportunity to redeem and heal the space we live in from the trauma of its particular religious history.

We as Muslims have a different story; our scripture was preserved as revealed, our scholars were decentralized and independent, and our tradition is defined by a balance between respecting the authority of expertise and thinking critically. Our legacy involves combining certain faith with fairness and respect for life.

Islam is the last hope for the world to learn this lesson. To refer back to the imagery of Lings, it is not merely the mysterious lost primordial religion that sits in the background as a shadowy mountain range. Every other religion, changed irrevocably from its original divine communication, also sits in the background,

covered in shadow and fog. It is only the mountain of Islam that stands in the foreground, crystal clear, as the final and preserved expression of Divine guidance for all mankind.