

A Message of Hope at the Eleventh Hour

Martin Lings, 1909-2005

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'The Spirit bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.'
(John, 3:8)

A few days before he died Martin Lings put the finishing touches to his last book, fittingly entitled *A Return to the Spirit*. A man who had indeed been 'born of the Spirit' was now declaring his readiness to return thereto, having lived his entire life in utter dedication to it. The book is indeed his valedictory message. It offers, as the subtitle of the book promises ('Questions and Answers'), a series of answers to some of the most fundamental questions being posed by seekers today; answers which are profound and yet at the same time disarmingly simple—this combination of profundity and simplicity having always characterized his style of doctrinal exposition.

There is no question more fundamental or simple than that with which the book begins: how does one put first things first, and it is entirely appropriate that this opening chapter is dedicated to the influence upon him of Frithjof Schuon, who, more than anyone else, helped him put first things first. Anyone wishing to know who Martin Lings was would have to begin by understanding his complete and immutable devotion to his teacher. To praise Lings is, inescapably, to praise Schuon, just as one cannot praise a painting without praising its painter; Lings was the very embodiment of the essential teachings of Schuon. The 'painting' however, went on to become a painter in its turn, and while always maintaining unimpeachable fidelity to his teacher's guidance, imparted to that guidance the accent, fragrance or colour of his own personality, in accordance with the maxim of Junayd: 'Water takes on the colour of the cup'. Thus, in the personality and the writings of Martin Lings we see not just a fruit of the way inaugurated by Frithjof Schuon but also a particularly striking mode of holiness bearing the unique stamp of his

own distinctive personality. The man was—according to most of those who knew him intimately—a saint, in Islamic terms, a ‘friend of God’ (*wali Allah*). If Islam had anything akin to a formal procedure for canonisation, such a procedure would undoubtedly have begun immediately upon the passing away of this great soul, known in the Muslim world as Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. In the Islamic tradition, however, saints are not canonised after death, they are recognised in their lifetime. The number of people who expressed their conviction that this man was indeed a saint is remarkable and can be taken as an expression of the principle *vox populi vox Dei*.

At the end of his life, Martin Lings radiated the holy fragrance of one who had lived his entire life dedicated to the ‘one thing needful’; the *baraka* of nearly seven decades of faithful, sincere, fervent invocation of the Divine Name was evident to all those who were privileged to come into contact with him. He was someone who not only knew that the best of acts was the invocation of the Name; in his presence the radiance of this best of acts could be felt in an almost tangible manner. The Qur’an tells us that *A good word is as a good tree: its root is firm, its branches are in heaven* (XIV, 24), to which Martin Lings adds this crucial comment: ‘This may be interpreted: an invocation, and above all the Supreme Name which is the best of good words, is not a flat utterance which spreads horizontally outwards in this world to be lost in thin air, but a vertical continuity of repercussions throughout all the states of being.’¹ For Martin Lings this perception of the sacramental efficacy of the invocation was not merely theoretical; what he describes is what he experienced, and what we could not help but sense: the divine Name truly ‘re-verberated’ throughout his being, and a being penetrated by the Name is a being penetrated by the Named, a sanctified being, for, as it is said in Sufism: *al-ism huwa’l-musamma*, the Name is the Named.

If sanctification herebelow be ‘proof’ of salvation hereafter, the presence of this man was irrefutable proof that the remembrance of God is not just a practice confined to a particular time and place, but a permanently flowing fountain of grace that can truly come to determine the whole of one’s life, and even overflow into the lives of others. The

¹ *Symbol and Archetype* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991), p.85.

‘friends of God’—the ‘slaves’ as opposed to the ‘righteous’—are those whose very hearts have become one with the fountain of remembrance from which they drink, and in drinking from it, they increase the flow of the fountain. It is to this mystery of radiant realization that the following verses of the Qur’an allude: *Truly the righteous shall drink from a filled cup [containing a drink] flavoured with Kafur—A fountain from which the slaves of God drink, making it flow with greater abundance* (LXXIV: 5-6). To be in this man’s presence was to truly to drink at the fountain of the remembrance of God.

When one thinks of the character of Martin Lings many qualities come to mind—humility, generosity, discipline, fidelity, wisdom. But one quality which strikes us as particularly apt in summing up his personality is expressed by the Arabic word *lutf*, which cannot be translated into English by a single word. It expresses a synthesis of the qualities of grace and compassion, loving-kindness and gentleness, intelligence and subtlety, but also, given its divine archetype, it denotes a certain power. ‘Al-Latif’, one of the most potent of all the divine Names, expresses, in addition to the gentle qualities, that irresistible force which surges forth from the intangible depths of infinite subtlety. It is for this reason that one has recourse to the invocation, ‘Ya Latif’ only in times of direst need. Now Martin Lings was truly *latif* in all these senses—his gentle, kind disposition was but the surface expression of a strong character implacably rooted in the Absolute, a character which radiated through great subtlety of intelligence and a flawless aesthetic sensibility. To encounter this combination of radiant generosity and adamant discipline, penetrating intelligence and purity of soul, was to experience nothing less than the attraction of divine grace, of *lutf*, gentle and sweet, yet of immense power. This same quality can be sensed in his writings—unshakeable certitude and intellectual authority are expressed with a lightness of touch, an elegant simplicity; his style of writing was as attractive as its content was convincing.

Martin Lings was indeed a master of the English language, as all his books demonstrate, but nowhere is this mastery more clearly revealed than in his poems, each of which, we dare say, is a masterpiece. As his early teacher at Oxford, C.S. Lewis exclaimed, upon receiving the poems: ‘This is true poetry!’ It is only a question of time

before he is recognised as the great poet that he was. We shall return to his poems shortly. But mentioning ‘time’ brings us to the question of Martin Lings’s attitude to the age in which we live. In common with the other great exponents of the perennial philosophy he of course viewed this age as one of decadence and decline; at this ‘eleventh hour’, one can expect nothing but further degeneration, in global terms, and despite inevitable fluctuations in particular domains, until the end of this cycle.

However, from a more fundamental—indeed, properly ‘perennial’—point of view, the life and works of Martin Lings, are testimony to the immensely positive potential for spirituality that is present in our times; a potential, indeed, which can never be discounted, for ‘the Spirit bloweth where it listeth’. There is no place here for pessimism: *for who despairs of the mercy of his Lord except those who stray?*, as the Qur’an asks rhetorically (XV: 56). On the contrary, Martin Lings delivered to us all a message of hope, of spiritual hope, that is, a hope which already participates in the object hoped-for. For the eleventh hour is characterised not only by darkness, but also by divine mercy, glimmerings of light which are all the more conspicuous against the background of the prevailing gloom: it is upon this aspect of mercy and grace, compensating for the global decadence, that Martin Lings was fixated, and not on the decadence itself. The parable of the eleventh hour given by Jesus—the fact that the workers who worked only for the eleventh hour received the same wage as those who worked throughout the heat of the day—clearly refers to the ‘increase’ of mercy at the end of time, a principle affirmed in Islam by the saying of the Prophet: ‘He who omits one tenth of the Law in the beginning of Islam will be damned; but he who accomplishes one tenth of the Law at the end of Islam will be saved’. Divine mercy super-abundantly compensates for human decadence. ‘Truly, My Mercy takes precedence over My Wrath’, according to a *hadith qudsi*; *My mercy encompasses all things*, according to the Qur’an (VII: 156). The darkness of our times, of the imminence of the end of the cycle, was indeed stressed by Martin Lings in his books and discourse, but not in order to inculcate a sense of doom and gloom; rather, in order to precipitate our awareness of the need to take advantage of the immense compensations of divine grace: every moment, he used to say often, is to be transformed into a ‘moment of mercy’. One should avail oneself, in every single

moment, of all the ‘available’ mercy, and thus galvanise one’s soul for ‘the one thing needful’.

The present age, moreover, assists the spiritual seeker indirectly, through the very ‘momentum’ generated by its frenetic activity as it approaches its final throes; the very ‘pull’ of the Hour can be harnessed to spiritual aspiration, even after one has passed from the ‘market’ (‘remaining passive in outward profanity’) to the ‘vineyard’ (‘activity with regard to the Kingdom of Heaven’): ‘... the liberating efforts of intelligence and will that are thus called into action may be prolonged, after the vineyard has been reached, to add their momentum, combined with that of the eleventh hour itself, to the “work”, that is, to the spiritual path.’²

As he often used to say, ‘Mercy will have the last word.’ We who were privileged to receive the guidance of this great soul were given two types of ‘proof’ of this mercy, the one principal and objective, deriving from awareness of the doctrines, both metaphysical and cosmological, teaching us that mercy, beauty, beatitude pertain to the essence of the Real, and that mercy compensates for the increasing decadence of the ‘last days’; the other ‘proof’ was personal and existential: that is, the very soul of Martin Lings himself was indubitable proof of the ‘availability’ of mercy even in these dark times, a sign that the ‘Spirit bloweth where it listeth’, concrete evidence that the ultimate goal is still accessible even in our most adverse conditions, a demonstration ‘in the flesh’ that the perennial wisdom is truly perennial, both in principle *and* practice, and thus cannot be eclipsed by any passing clouds of modernist misosophy or materialistic ‘culture’, however dark they may be. This was Martin Lings’s greatest gift to his disciples and students all over the world: he not only expressed by his eloquent words, but manifested by his sanctified being, a message of hope, a spiritual ‘optimism’, rooted in aspiration for the only goal that is ever worth pursuing, whatever the age or era. He not only proved existentially, beyond all need for logical demonstration, that the highest ideals are still realizable: the radiance of his *lutf* rendered these ideals attractive and powerful and utterly irresistible.

² *The Eleventh Hour* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), p.12.

To return to his poetry, the poem entitled ‘Self-Portrait’ expresses well the joy that emanates from a soul imbued with the perennial spirit, even though born in such an anti-traditional age; it shows beautifully that the perennialist is not a sentimental traditionalist, bemoaning our times and wishing he were born in some pre-modern age. After referring to various revelations, and apparently sorrowing at his absence at these marvellous moments when Heaven touched earth directly, he finally expresses his absence from the *bay’at ar-ridwan*, ‘the pact of [divine] beatitude’, when the believers made the pact of allegiance to the Prophet ‘beneath the tree’, the prototype of the esoteric initiation in Islam; and then concludes with the real meaning of his ‘lament’:

‘When half a thousand years and more
Had passed, and men allegiance swore
To the Arab Prophet, beneath the tree,
My willing hand was still not free
From bonds of time and space to be
Between his hands in fealty.

Such blessings missed, time was when I
Within myself would wonder why,
Half quarrelling with the book of fate
For having writ me down so late.
But now I no longer my lot
Can question, and of what was not.
No more I say: Would it had been!
For I have seen what I have seen,
And I have heard what I have heard.
So if to tears ye see me stirred,
Presume not that they spring from woe:
In thankful wonderment they flow.
Praise be to Him, the Lord, the King,

Who gives beyond all reckoning.’³

This poem expresses what everybody in our times can ‘see’ and ‘hear’ if we but open our eyes and ears: the marvellous, diverse manifestations of the Logos, whose essence is beyond time and space, and thus accessible always and everywhere. ‘Before Abraham was, I am’, said Jesus, expressing his nature as the Logos; it is to this timeless Logos that the *haq_qa muhammadiyya* likewise refers: ‘I was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay’. Instead of dwelling on the negative features of our times, Martin Lings urged us to take advantage of the ‘wisdom’ that also accompanies the ‘old age’ of the cosmos, reminding us that terminality rejoins primordiality. This wisdom is nothing less than the spiritual patrimony of mankind—of all mankind and not any one particular religious sector. In this patrimony we can truly rejoice, shed tears of wonderment, and receive that spiritual sustenance (*rizq*) to which the last line of the poem alludes. We are sure that the poet wished us to recall here the words uttered by the Blessed Virgin, when asked by Zakariyya from whence she had received the *rizq* that he found with her, miraculously, for the *rizq* in question was, according to tradition, ‘fruits out of season’. These words come in a verse of the Qur’an especially dear to Martin Lings, for many reasons. The Blessed Virgin replies to Zakariyya:

It is from God; verily God giveth sustenance to whom He will beyond all reckoning

(III: 37). (*Huwa min ‘indi’Llah; inna’Llaha yarzuqu man yasha’u bi-ghayri-hisab*)

To return to the image of the good word as a good tree, let us recall that the verse of the Qur’an continues with an image that we can apply to perennial wisdom itself: a ‘fruit’ that is always accessible, one which is brought into harmonious reverberation with our deepest being by the best of acts, the invocation of the Name of God: *A good word is as a good tree: its root is firm, its branches are in heaven. It giveth forth its fruits at all times, by the permission of its Lord ...* (XIV, 24-25).

³ *Collected Poems* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2002), p.53.

Two days before he died, Martin Lings planted a tree. He thus symbolically re-enacted that for the sake of which he lived all his life—planting the seed of the remembrance in his own heart, and in the hearts of all those who were blessed by his guidance. This is also what the Prophet of Islam bade us do: ‘When you see the Hour approaching, plant a tree.’

We can fittingly conclude this homage to our teacher by quoting what he wrote himself in respect of the ‘archetype of devotional homage’. He is clearly describing what he experienced upon coming into ‘contact with actual perfection’; but he also, and entirely unwittingly, describes accurately what many of us, as his disciples, experienced in regard to our own contact with him:

‘ ... all devotional homage, all hero-worship worthy of the name, proceeds subjectively from the perfection which exists in every soul, even though, in the majority, it has been buried under the rubble of a fallen second nature. If the burial is too deep, the sense of values can be irremediably vitiated; but even a remote consciousness of the latent perfection is enough to serve as a basis for having ideals and to arouse in souls, at contact with actual perfection, the nostalgic recognition of a fulfilment which for themselves is also a possibility and a goal to be reached.’⁴

That, precisely, is the message of hope given and embodied by Martin Lings at the ‘eleventh hour’: he helped to arouse within us the ‘nostalgic recognition of a fulfilment’, the ultimate fulfilment, which is for us also a ‘possibility and a goal to be reached.’

May God be well-pleased with him and sanctify his mystery.

Radiya 'Llahu 'anhu wa qaddasa sirrahu.

⁴ *Symbol and Archetype*, p.53.