

Followup on the *Study Quran*, Perennialism, and Joseph Lombard's claims

In their angry reactions to my review of *The Study Quran* (*The Muslim World Book Review*, 36:3, 2016, pp. 20-25)¹ Joseph Lombard and others have levelled accusations of bad faith, ulterior motives and short-sightedness against me among other charges, on the Facebook pages of Lombard and *TSQ* and elsewhere. The onslaught on almost every point I had made began in May 2016 and has continued, on and off, through this January and February 2017, with equivocations and excuses which I will address exclusively of the rest, since they retained the veneer of academic knowledge which the ad hominem and anathemas shed to the last fig-leaf. The following clarification might also serve as a reminder, to all those whom *TSQ* concerns for better or for worse, of the ideological roots of its progenitors, with special emphasis on *TSQ*'s syncretic and anti-traditional slant.

Joseph Lombard has expressed disbelief in my definition of so-called traditionalism or "Perennialism"—the school of thought to which he, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the rest of the co-producers of *The Study Quran* subscribe—as a Western adaptation of Hinduism that relativizes religions as all indifferently true. I remind him that the *coup d'envoi* of the founding father of Perennialism, René Guénon (1886-1951), was a 350-page thesis devoted to the theology of the Vedas entitled *A General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (1921) but rejected as ahistorical by Sylvain Lévi (the top French Indologist at the time). Similarly Nasr, in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, proposed to de-historicize Islam in the guise of, as Lombard himself put it, "treat[ing it] independently and evaluat[ing it] on its own terms," so that, having relegated all religions to their respective vacua, he could make one be just as valid as any other without regard to the divine Will and its actual message unfolding in history.

As I had mentioned in my original review, the Qur'ān itself pre-empted this newfangled relativization in the most "esoteric" and "universalist" terms (to use Perennialist linguo), in a covenant explicitly situated at the beginning of time and solemnly binding Christians and Jews until the end of time: *And [recall, O People of the Scripture,] when Allah took the covenant of the prophets: "Whatever I give you of the Scripture and wisdom and then there comes to you a messenger confirming what is with you, you must absolutely believe in him and you must absolutely support him! Have you acknowledged and have you taken upon yourselves My great charge?" They said, "We have acknowledged [it]." He said, "Then bear witness! And I am with you among the witnesses"* (Āl 'Imrān 3:81).

More proofs of the supersession by the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'ān and Islam of all other heavenly prophets, dispensations and scriptures are found elsewhere in the Qur'ān, as well as in Hadith and the Consensus.² The denial of supersession (*naskh*) is a Judaizing leitmotiv of Perennialism as I already showed in my original review of

¹ See https://www.academia.edu/24894666/The_Study_Quran_Review_Haddad_02Mar2016_MWBR

² See my entry "Abrogation" in the *Integrated Encyclopedia of Qur'ān*, Vol. I.

TSQ and my 2005 critique of Martin Lings' *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*.³

Lumbard has flailed at my introduction of Nasr as the heir apparent of the syncretist Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) as head of the Maryamiyya Order, a universalist movement based on the so-called Traditionalist school. He was upset by the term "syncretist," although the scathing rebukes of Schuon's "vague, superficial and facile universalism" by no less than Guénon and Michel Vâlsan (1911-1974) are well-known.⁴ Schuon's present-day admirers and defenders also call him a syncretist. After one of them, P. Ringgenberg, did just that in Vol. 7 of the journal *Sacred Web*, the next volume featured three apologetic pieces, among them T. Scott's pontification that the Spirit was above the Law ("(Gal.5:18)") and S. Korn's, which "argu[ed] instead for the liberal perspective that values principled syncretism as a necessary component of religious pluralism." This *principled syncretism* no doubt includes Nasr's importune defense of Trinitarianism before the baffled Presbyterian theologian John Hick (1922-2012) when the latter proposed to call for a reform of Christianity with the position that Christ should *not* be identified with God as the Second Person of the Trinity. It is enough proof of the syncretism of Perennialists that many of those who are presumed to be Muslims among them unjustifiably view their faith as a private affair to be kept secret. This is because their primary identification is with Traditionalism as a sect rather than with the community of the Shari'a, much like Nasr's allegiance to what he calls "the eternal sophia," of which "Islamic wisdom" is but one "embodiment" among many.⁵

One wonders what Lumbard would conjure up to justify Schuon's tampering with categorical obligations and prohibitions in Islam (the Pillars and alcohol) as "exoteric" formalities that can be "essentialized" in light of what he claimed to be "current cyclical conditions;" his paganistic claims of human "theomorphism" and "deiformism;" his delusions of supraethical grandeur; and his cult of "sacred nudity" which included unclad huddles, painting the genitalia of holy women and the claim, to boot, that it was all compatible with Islam.⁶ This went on precisely because Schuon

³ https://www.academia.edu/30985535/Critique_of_Martin_Lings_Life_of_the_Prophet_Muhammad

⁴ See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 129 and 306 nn. 63-65.

⁵ In Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 1998), p. 16. See Muhammad Legenhausen's analysis of these exchanges ("the odd spectacle of a Christian cleric who would reform Christianity by denying the Trinity being advised by a Muslim sage that the doctrine of the Trinity must not be abandoned by Christians... Nasr goes so far as to assert that even if historical documents could prove that Christ and his Apostles did not believe in the doctrines of the Trinity or Incarnation, such doctrines were divinely willed for later Christians") at <https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol14-n4/misgivings-about-religious-pluralisms-seyyed-hosseini-nasr-and-john-hick-dr-0>

⁶ See chapter 14 of Arthur Versluis, *American Gurus: From American Transcendentalism to New Age Religion*; Hugh B. Urban's article "A Dance of Masks" in G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal, ed., *Crossing boundaries: essays on the ethical status of mysticism*, available at https://www.academia.edu/8979853/A_Dance_of_Masks_The_Esoteric_Ethics_of_Frithjof_Schuon; Sedgwick, "How Traditional Are the Traditionalists? The Case of the Guenonian Sufis," *ARIES* 22 (1999), pp. 11-12; and *Against the Modern World*, pp. 124-129.

probed syncretism with hubris, only to end up a blasphemous lecher whom Flaubert would have happily included in his catalogue of heretics in *La tentation de Saint Antoine*. And this is the person Nasr has promoted in the English-speaking world as the greatest intellectual figure of the 20th century, with an opus of his own that “could be read as a brilliant and richly referenced development of Schuon’s work.”⁷

There was also Lombard’s insistence that what I called *The Study Quran*’s embedded 42nd, original commentary on the part of Nasr was not by Nasr but by the latter’s co-editors, Lombard included. He wanted credit. But to repeat my citation of Nasr’s own words, the sum total is “not simply a collage of selections but a new work” (*TSQ* p. xliii). This magnum opus, as the fallout painfully confirms, is not Lombard’s brainchild but that of his editor-in-chief, who is the only original thinker of the lot and the one under discussion. It is Nasr’s name that looms large on the cover and has now gone on record as having subsumed the eternal Message of Islam under a latter-day, man-made construct dubbed “Tradition.” *The Study Quran* is essentially Nasr’s monument to Schuonism—*The Schuon Quran*—with the real Qur’ān as its podium.

Then there was the steady refrain on the part of the *TSQ* editors and apologists that “*The Study Quran* is not a *tafsīr*.” Is it not hypocrisy for those brazen enough to call their own work a *Qur’ān* to then clamor that it should not be called a Quranic commentary? Is it their way of saying that engaged readers are not welcome and that reviews such as mine should have been, in the words of the late Andrew Rippin in his wish list for *The Integrated Encyclopedia of Qur’ān*, “more agnostic”? Or is being, as they like to specify, merely “a modern academic text” the preferred cloak, the more politically correct (and marketable) *bid‘a* after Nasr’s introduction tooting the Muslimness of the editors? What is more certain is that the reason they protested their work was not a *tafsīr* is not humbleness before the discipline, nor so much a recognition that they do not meet its pre-requisites and shirk accountability by its standards; but banal Orientalism—careerist confidence and pride in the assumed superiority of agnostic, “modern” academia over *‘ilm*.

The Study Quran is very much a *tafsīr* even if its language is English, even if its orientation is heterodox and its authorship and spirit a spectacular betrayal of the genre. Its subject-matter and contents purport to be a systematic and sequential explanation of the meanings of the Qur’ān from beginning to end, which meets the standard definition of *tafsīr* upon which agree exegetical practice and others who wrote on this issue.⁸ In addition, being an integral translation of the meanings of the

⁷ Patrick Laude, “Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the Context of the Perennialist School,” in *Beacon of Knowledge: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohammad H. Faghfoory (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003) p. 248. This assessment is by one of the two co-authors of *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teaching* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), a book foreworded by Nasr who eulogized it as potentially the most authoritative on its subject (“This book will likely become a primary source in future years”). The latter assessment is equally remarkable and self-referential, since Nasr elsewhere declared himself the most knowledgeable person alive on the work of Schuon.

⁸ E.g., Norman Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre,” in *Approaches to the Qur’ān*, ed. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (London and New York:

Qur’ān into a non-Arabic language for the nescient also qualifies it as a “*tafsīr* for beginners,” as Shāh Waliyyullāh characterized his own Persian translation, which he patterned after al-Wāhidī’s *al-Tafsīr al-wajīz* and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* in brevity.⁹ At any rate this is how it will most probably be perceived by the masses, both Muslim and non-Muslim; and it is precisely as *tafsīr* that it will disarm resistance and enter everywhere to deliver its message. The contents are for the most part secondary—cullings from 41 works of *tafsīr* meant to lend *TSQ* heft and authority. It is Nasr’s embedded 42nd work that counts, as it supplies the original material that is not to be found anywhere else in all Islamic literature, and is the thing of which the rest is meant to be the delivery system.

Lumbard’s rejoinder on my criticism of the *SQ* translation of the Quranic verse 2:55 (and not 2:49 as I had mis-stated) was that, contrary to what I said, al-Ṭabarī does not present the rendering “we will not believe just for your sake/just because you say so,” whether as the primary meaning or as an alternative interpretation. However, in his commentary on the very next verse, 2:56, al-Ṭabarī does cite a report as the context for the reason why the Israelites said what they said in 2:55. This context is what serves to illustrate why *TSQ*’s hackneyed rendering falls short. The report states that the elite of 70 whom Mūsā chose to accompany him to the divine tryst (after Hārūn died) were allowed to hear the divine commands actually being spoken to Mūsā as he hid from their sight in a cloud; but when the tryst was over and the cloud lifted they said to him: “*Lan nu’mina laka...*” This explains why all the great Sunni linguistic commentators took into consideration the *lām* in *laka* here in the sense of “*for your sake, because of what you say*” (*min ajlika/li-ajli qawlika*), as if the Israelites were now accusing Mūsā of ventriloquism, and as opposed to merely “believe you.”

Lumbard further claimed that “if one goes through the major *tafāsīr*, one will not find Haddad’s proposed translation to be the preferred interpretation of the phrase in question.” On the contrary, such is found as *the primary gloss* in al-‘Ukbarī’s *I’rāb al-Qur’ān*, al-Bayḍāwī, al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī, Ibn ‘Ādil in *al-Lubāb*, Abussu‘ud, al-Ālūsī in *Rūḥ al-ma‘ānī* (in the history of *tafsīr* it is the latter five that are the top authoritative and most studied linguistic commentaries, not the works Lumbard cites), Thanā’ullāh Pānipattī’s *Tafsīr al-Mazharī*, al-Uramī’s massive *Ḥadā’iq al-rawḥ wal-rayḥān*; and it is found as *the only gloss* in al-Biqā‘ī’s *Nazm al-durar* (citing al-Ḥarrālī’s linguistic 7th-c. *tafsīr*) and al-‘Ulaymī’s *Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān*. It is also mentioned in *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*—another foremost linguistic *tafsīr*—and elsewhere as well such as Itfayyish and Ḥumayyān (two Ibadī *tafsīrs*). The plain translation “we will not believe you” ignores the subtlety of the Quranic wording and treats *laka* exactly the same as if it had been *bika*. Lumbard’s rejoinder thus shows trite appeal to

Routledge, 1993), pp. 101-140. On the typology of the genre see the chapter on the varieties of Quranic *tafsīr* in Shāh Waliyyullāh’s *al-Fawz al-kabīr*.

⁹ See Shāh Waliyyullāh, *al-Fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr: The Great Victory on Qur’ānic Hermeneutics*, transl. Tahir Mahmood Kiani (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2014), pp. 167, 195 and Miṣbāḥ Allāh ‘Abd al-Bāqī, “*al-Imām Waliyyullāh al-Dihlawī wa-tarjamatuḥu lil-Qur’ān*” in *Majallat al-buḥūth wal-dirāsāt al-Qur’āniyya*, vol. 6 (Year 3), pp. 179-180, 184.

brand-names and little intelligence of the hierarchy of the types of *tafsīr* and their relevance in the selection and validation of exegetical alternatives.

It is also not true, as Lombard claimed, that *rūḥ al-qudus* “is actually glossed by several commentators, among them al-Zamakhshārī and al-Rāzī as *al-rūḥ al-muqaddas*, or ‘The Holy Spirit’ [my emphasis].” Such a deliberately misleading response on Lombard’s part speaks volumes as it typifies the problem with *The Study Quran*. First, the Arabic phrase *al-rūḥ al-muqaddas* does not mean “the holy spirit” at all, but rather “the spirit made clean and kept pure [passive] of blemish,” “the spirit exempted [passive] of imperfection.” *Muqaddas* is a *mufa‘al* form, so one would at least translate it “made holy, sanctified.” Keeping the passive would not only have been true to the original Arabic of the gloss Lombard himself invokes; it would have precluded any creeping doubt about the bestowed, created nature of the holiness, and steered clear of trinitarianese.

Second, the English phrase “The Holy Spirit” has invariably Christian connotations for most English readers, but how can the same readers know that the phrase *al-rūḥ al-muqaddas* has no such connotation for the imams Lombard cites? Or that it was never used as the phrase corresponding to *Spiritus Sanctus*—with its self-existent holiness as the third hypostasis of the Godhead—in Christian Arabic liturgies? Readers realize that Zamakhshārī and Rāzī did not use the English phrase “The Holy Spirit” with its unmistakable capitals and Byzantine baggage; but by dropping such names in support of that phrase, Lombard hopes to facilitate a *tafsīr*-authorized confusion between the Islamic meaning (the created angel of revelation) meant by Zamakhshārī and Rāzī, and the unislamic meaning suggested by *TSQ*. Lombard ignores all the above red flags and once more hides behind the skirts of prior translations as a proof in his favor. He probably also believes that the fawning endorsements of *TSQ* signify its reliability.

Perennialism appears to promote anti-materialism and spiritual renewal but, on the other hand, seeks to neutralize orthodox discourse through “esotericism” and “entryism.” Its project was energized among 19th-century European intellectuals and scholars after the massive loss of faith caused by the rediscovered Vedas¹⁰ and Nietzsche. *The Study Quran* now seems to inaugurate a renewal phase and its officiants aim to subvert the message of the Qur’ān and redefine Islam as one truth among others, its finality and exclusivity as a living religion all but cancelled. Denial and diatribe are hardly surprising from those who stand accused of misrepresenting Islam and striving to corrupt its scripture in broad daylight. One might, however, ponder as a Quranic lesson the barefaced militancy with which *ta’khudhuhum al-‘izzatu bil-ithm*.

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¹⁰ See Raymond Schwab’s *The Oriental Renaissance*.