Followup on the *Study Quran*, Perennialism, and Joseph Lumbard’s claims

In their angry reactions to my review of *The Study Quran* (*The Muslim World Book Review*, 36:3, 2016, pp. 20-25) Joseph Lumbard and others have levelled accusations of bad faith, ulterior motives and short-sightedness against me among other charges, on the Facebook pages of Lumbard 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 hominemms 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 Lumbard 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 Lumbard 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. The denial of supersession (*naskh*) is a Judaizing leitmotiv of Perennialism as I already showed in my original review of

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

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. This went on precisely because Schuon

3 https://www.academia.edu/30985535/Critique_of_Martin_Lings_Life_of_the_Prophet_Muhammad
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-hossein-nasr-and-john-hick-dr-0
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.”

There was also Lumbard’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, Lumbard 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 Lumbard’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 hubleness 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.\footnote{E.g., Norman Calder, “Tafsīr from Tabari to Ibn Kathir: 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:}

\footnote{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.} In addition, being an integral translation of the meanings of the
Qu’ran into a non-Arabic language for the nescient also qualifies it as a “tafsîr for beginners,” as Shâh Waliyyullâh characterized his own Persian translation, which he patterned after al-Wâhidî’s al-Tafsîr al-wajîz and Tafsîr al-Jalâlîn in brevity. 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 tafsîr that it will disarm resistance and enter everywhere to deliver its message. The contents are for the most part secondary—culprits from 41 works of tafsîr 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-Ṭabarî 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-Ṭabarî does cites 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 Mûsâ chose to accompany him to the divine tryst (after Hârîn died) were allowed to hear the divine commands actually being spoken to Mûsâ 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 lâm in laka here in the sense of “for your sake, because of what you say” (min ajlika/li-ajli gawlika), as if the Israelites were now accusing Mûsâ of ventriloquism, and as opposed to merely “believe you.”

Lumbard further claimed that “if one goes through the major tafsîr, 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-‘Ukbarî’s I’râb al-Qur’ân, al-Baydawî, al-Samîn al-Ḥalabî, Ibn ‘Adîl in al-Lubâb, Abussu’ud, al-Ālusi in Rûh al-ma’ânî (in the history of tafsîr it is the latter five that are the top authoritative and most studied linguistic commentaries, not the works Lumbard cites), Thanâ’ullâh Pânipattî’s Tafsîr al-Mazhari, al-Uramî’s massive Hadâ’iq al-rawh wal-rayhân; and it is found as the only gloss in al-Biqâ’î’s Nazm al-durar (citing al-Ḥarrâlî’s linguistic 7th-c. tafsîr) and al-‘Ulami’s Fath al-Rahmân. It is also mentioned in al-Bahr al-muḥîf—another foremost linguistic tafsîr—and elsewhere as well such as Iftayyish and Ḥumayyân (two Ibadi tafsîrs). 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

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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 Lumbard 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 Lumbard’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 Lumbard 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 Lumbard 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, Lumbard 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*. Lumbard 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 Vedas 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*. 