

In Memoriam: Dr. Martin Lings

(January 24, 1909 – May 12, 2005)

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Future generations will acclaim Dr. Martin Lings for writing the definitive English language study on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, which is based upon an exhaustive study of primary Arabic sources of the eighth and ninth centuries.¹ *Islamic Quarterly* called this best selling book “an enthralling story that combines impeccable scholarship with a rare sense of the sacred worthy of the subject.” This *tour de force* established Dr. Lings as a widely acknowledged expert on the Prophet Muhammad—arguably the foremost expert of our time. But this is only the most visible accomplishment of his remarkable life.

Martin Lings was born in Lancashire, England, in 1909 and received both his BA (1932) and his MA (1937) from Oxford in English literature.² After teaching English in Poland, he was appointed lecturer in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English at the University of Kaunas in Lithuania, where he remained until 1939. He taught English and English literature—primarily Shakespeare—at the University of Cairo from 1940 until 1951. He joined the British Library in 1955 as Keeper of the Arabic Library, eventually becoming the Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum and the British Library until his retirement in 1973.³ Lings received his PhD from the University of London in 1959. This short history of his academic study and working life provides only a small part of the entire picture of the man.

The most important aspect of his life was his spiritual quest as a serious seeker of Truth, which began in his youth. In a 1993 video-taped interview with Dr. Lings, he

¹ Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (1983) The book is widely used in university classes throughout the world and its numerous distinctions include special award presentations to Dr. Lings by the presidents of both Pakistan and Egypt. Dr. Lings translated previously unpublished material for this project.

² While at Oxford, Lings began a friendship with C.S. Lewis, his tutor, that would last the remainder of Lewis' life.

³ More biographical details and a detailed bibliography can be found at www.worldwisdom.com under the “Author” entry on Martin Lings.

recounted his Protestant religious education in the 1920s in the “extraordinary period of euphoria” just after World War I when people thought there would be no more wars.⁴ He related the anti-spiritual influences of the time, including the seemingly all-important scientific theories of the day. He explained that “at the end of my university education I did not know what to think about religion. In any case, religion offered nothing to my intelligence.” Lings’ own personal quest led him to the writings of René Guénon, the French philosopher (1886-1951) who was the founder of what came to be known as the Perennialist or Traditionalist School of thought. Guénon’s writings provided Lings with the intellectual keys for an understanding of the errors of a modern world in which religion had become marginalized. Of greater importance to Lings, Guénon’s writings also awakened within him the realization that there is a common inner Truth that exists within each of the great world religions—“an esoteric aspect” sometimes called the *sophia perennis* (perennial wisdom)—and that “each of the world’s great religions was a true religion.” Further, Guénon explained that each of the great traditional religions offered a path of prayer that led toward re-establishing man’s original “primordial perfection and union with God.” In response, Lings realized, “I knew that I was face to face with the Truth. It was almost like being struck by lightning.... I knew that something must be done about this.”

In 1937 Martin Lings’ search led him to some of the first articles published by Frithjof Schuon in *Études Traditionnelles*, a French journal edited by Guénon and to which he contributed. When Lings wrote to Guénon later that year asking permission to translate one of Guénon’s books into English,⁵ he mentioned his growing interest in Schuon’s writings. After receiving Guénon’s positive response about Schuon, Lings learned that Schuon lived in Switzerland and went there to meet him in January 1938. “I knew when I was in his (Schuon’s) presence that I was in the presence of a true saint and also the spiritual master that I was seeking. When I say ‘true saint,’ I don’t mean just a

⁴ Parts of my 1993 video-taped interview with Dr. Lings have recently been edited and are now available on www.worldwisdom.com in a multi-media Slide Show entitled, “Martin Lings: Video Clips on his Early Spiritual Influences.” All of the unattributed remarks in quotations come from his comments in that interview.

⁵ Lings translated Guénon’s *East and West* (1941) into English. His translations also include *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology* (2004).

saintly man but a true saint of the first magnitude, such as one cannot expect to meet in the twentieth century.... I knew this with a certainty.”

Like Guénon, Schuon’s doctrinal understanding was grounded in traditional Hindu metaphysics. Schuon later wrote, “I have had since my youth a particular interest in *Advaita Vedânta*, but also in the method of realization of which *Advaita Vedânta* approves. Since I could not find this method—in its strict and esoteric form—in Europe, and since it was impossible for me to turn to a Hindu guru because of the laws of the castes, I had to look elsewhere; and since Islam *de facto* contains this method, in Sufism, I finally decided to look for a Sufi master; the outer form did not matter to me.”⁶ In 1932 Schuon’s spiritual search led him to Algeria, where the following year he was initiated into a Shadhiliyyah-Darqawiyyah Sufi order⁷ by the revered Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi (1869-1934). In 1935 Schuon was appointed as a representative of this Sufi order in Europe.

Schuon was to become a spiritual guide for adherents to diverse religions from all over the world, but in 1938 all of Schuon’s European followers entered Islam in order to follow his personal practices of prayer. The young Martin Lings immediately embraced this example and received the Islamic name of Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. Within the span of a few days Lings found his life-long spiritual guide, made a commitment to a life of inner prayer, and entered Islam. This meeting with Schuon, “just one week before my 29th birthday,” was to change the remaining 67 years of his life.

In 1940 Lings traveled to Cairo to meet Guénon, whom Lings had since learned was also a practicing Sufi, albeit in a different order from Schuon. For the next eleven years Lings earned his living by teaching English at the University of Cairo, while perfecting his Arabic language skills and also serving as Guénon’s personal secretary. This period also marked the start of Lings’ writing career, beginning with *The Book of*

⁶ From a letter dated January 1996.

⁷ This is an unbroken succession of Sufi masters (*shaykhs*) that traces its origins to Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (1196-1258) and that includes among its subsequent branches an order founded in the nineteenth century by Moulay al-Arabi ad-Darqawi (1790-1823).

Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision, and Gnosis, which he first wrote in Arabic and then translated into English (first English edition 1952). This comprehensive account of Sufi doctrine was published under Lings' Islamic name—Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. The book demonstrated Lings' comprehensive knowledge of the Koran and traditional Sufi metaphysics, and a deep interest in universal symbolism. It also revealed his way with English prose, which always tended toward the poetic.

While living in Cairo, Lings maintained a correspondence with a young woman he had met when she was four years old and he was eight years old. In 1944 this young woman, Leslie Smalley, became his wife and spiritual companion for the remainder of his life. Leslie Lings, now age 92, survives her husband and is still living in their home of more than 30 years in the rural Kent countryside of rolling hills an hour's drive outside central London.

After the death of Guénon in 1951, and the upheavals of Egyptian nationalism, Lings and his wife returned to London where he completed his PhD while working for the British Museum. His PhD thesis was later revised and published as *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi* (1973). It is recognized as the definitive study of the life and teachings of this great Sufi master and has now been translated into languages that include French, Spanish, Persian, Urdu, and Arabic. The renowned Cambridge professor of Islamic Studies, A.J. Arberry, hailed the “important original contributions to knowledge” in the book, adding, “I know of no more lucid and convincing interpretation of Ibn Arabi's much debated ‘pantheistic’ philosophy.”

Lings' position at the British Museum and British Library gave him exceptional access to rare oriental manuscripts, thus allowing him to publish the most comprehensive and definitive study on the sacred art of Koranic reproduction in *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (1976).⁸ Dr. Martin Lings has thus presented the world with a comprehensive volume on Sufi doctrine (*The Book of Certainty*), a penetrating

⁸ Dr. Lings directly supervised the preparation of the color plates for the new edition of this book, which is a work of art as far as the printing is concerned.

introduction to Sufism entitled *What is Sufism?* (1975), and three definitive studies on Islam: one on the Sufi Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi, one on the sacred art of the Koran, and his *tour de force* on the Prophet Muhammad.⁹ His close friend Seyyed Hossein Nasr recently observed, “the most famous and ‘original’ books of Shaykh Abu Bakr are *The Book of Certainty*, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, and *Mohammad*.”¹⁰ All of these books are based upon early primary Arabic sources and upon incontestable traditional Islamic sources, thus providing an unbiased and accurate picture of Islam before centuries of political conflicts and theological disputes confused the situation. The names of Martin Lings and Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din are widely known and acclaimed throughout the Islamic world as an eminent exponent of authentic Islam, including Sufism, the heart of Islamic spirituality.¹¹

While Martin Lings is best known for his brilliant expositions of Islam and Islamic mysticism, it would be a mistake to conclude that his spiritual interests and writings were limited to Islam; rather his philosophical perspective is rooted in the esoteric truths within every religion that are illuminated by the writers in the Perennialist School. The Perennialist School was founded by Guénon, continued by A.K. Coomaraswamy, and reached its fullest development with the writings of Frithjof Schuon. But Martin Lings will be remembered as one of the foremost contributors to this school of thought, together with his close friends Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Lings published three books on universal wisdom during his life: *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (1964), a critique of the modern world, *The Eleventh Hour: The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy* (1989), in which he deals with eschatological questions, and *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (1991), which is a masterful study of the traditional doctrine of symbols. But his indefatigable energy will result in the publication of three posthumous works. *A Return to the Spirit: Questions and Answers* is the story of his own spiritual

⁹ A forthcoming film by Ovidio Salazar entitled *Circling the House of God: Reflections of Martin Lings on Hajj* is based upon interviews in which Dr Lings describes his experiences on pilgrimages he made in 1948 and in 1976. It is scheduled for release by Archetype in November, 2005 (www.archetype.uk.com).

¹⁰ From private correspondence.

¹¹ Each of these books has been translated into many languages and has been widely distributed throughout both the Western and Islamic worlds.

quest and a compilation of some of the answers he has provided over the years to spiritual seekers (forthcoming by Fons Vitae, Sept 2005). *The Underlying Religion* (co-edited by Clinton Minnaar and forthcoming by World Wisdom, 2006) is an anthology of articles selected by Dr. Lings to introduce readers to the essential teachings of the Perennialist School. He wrote the preface to this anthology less than two weeks before his death. Dr. Lings also approved the publication of *The Essential Martin Lings*, co-edited by Reza Shah-Kazemi and Emma Clark, and had numerous discussions with them about his own ideas for this volume, which is still in preparation (forthcoming World Wisdom, date not yet determined). It is hoped that these three works will both serve to crown his remarkable career as an expositor of universal Truth, and introduce new readers to a compelling wisdom that changed Lings' life more than sixty years ago.

Martin Lings was also a poet. C.S. Lewis said of some of Lings' poetry that it was "sheer inspiration." Indeed, poetry was Lings' first calling, and he was steeped in the music and eloquence of early English poetry, the verses of Dante, and, of course, the genius of Shakespeare. Yet, after encountering the spiritual message of Guénon and Schuon, and beginning upon his spiritual path, he did not feel ready to write poetry again for many years. In the introduction to his first book of poetry, he was later to write that "my poetical ambition had been absorbed into a higher ambition, the only one worth having," meaning the spiritual quest. It was only upon the completion of a spiritual retreat of many weeks that poetry again began to flow through his pen. He had not written poetry for 15 years. He subsequently published two books of poems, *The Elements and other poems* and *The Heralds and other poems*, which appear together in *Collected Poems: Revised and Augmented* (2001).¹² These are all poems of introspection and wisdom, with a keen eye to the beauties of the natural world and a deep sense of the sacred. Martin Lings clearly had the soul of a born poet as well as the skill of a craftsman of fine verse, and his spiritual attainment provided the appropriate content.

¹² *Collected Poems* includes three previously unpublished poems. Hamza Yusuf wrote, "As far as I can tell, 'The Meeting Place' is as good as poetry gets. Stunning is the only word for it. That it is not anthologized in books of modern poetry is a crime against the craft and an affront to the poet. Since discovering it, I have read it on many occasions alone and to friends in my home and over the phone always with the same result, profound silence.... Lesser poems would pale at its side and it would embarrass what passes for poetry these days." From his book review.

His written legacy is not complete without a discussion of his unique contribution to the study of Shakespeare. Some observers, including Dr. Lings himself, might opine that his insights into the esoteric message of Shakespeare constitute one of his most important legacies.¹³ The fourth edition of his book on Shakespeare is entitled *The Sacred Art of Shakespeare: To Take Upon Us the Mystery of Things* (1998). In the foreword to that edition, the Prince of Wales, one of Lings' longtime admirers, says, "I found it hard to put down as it is clearly written from an intimate, personal awareness of the meaning of the symbols which Shakespeare used to describe the inner drama of the journey of the soul contained, as it is, within the outer earthly drama of the plays." Dr. Lings lectured widely about the sacred and universal aspects of Shakespeare's writings.¹⁴ Many of his lectures were presented under the auspices of the Temenos Academy,¹⁵ where he was a fellow.

His vast written corpus is only one part of his legacy. His own spiritual radiance resulted in a flowering of spiritual seekers around him. In his later years, many of Lings' disciples insisted that he use the title of Shaykh, or spiritual guide, to which he was undoubtedly entitled. Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din had many spiritual followers on five continents.

In order to present an integral portrait of both the man and his legacy, it is appropriate to describe the indefatigable physical energy that permeated the entire life of Martin Lings. When Martin Lings was 82 years old, Frithjof Schuon pointed to Lings as

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr once asked his close friend why he continued to be so much concerned with Shakespeare. Dr. Nasr recalled, "He (Lings) said that since the English language was now becoming global, the time of Shakespeare had arrived and that it was most important to preserve this language at its peak and in expressions impregnated with the deepest wisdom and traditional teachings. In this way the spread of English would not contribute simply to the impoverishment of various cultures." These remarks are quoted from a moving tribute to Dr. Lings by Dr. Nasr that will appear in the next issue of *Sophia*.

¹⁴ A film is forthcoming based upon a lecture entitled "Shakespeare and Islam" given by Dr. Lings at the Globe Theatre in 2004. This project is organized and supported by Hamza Yusuf, one of the best known American Muslims and a warm admirer of Dr. Lings. For information about this film visit www.matmedia.org. A separate film project based upon private interviews with Dr. Lings about Shakespeare is also currently in preparation by Ira Zinman.

¹⁵ The guiding light of the Temenos Academy, www.temenosacademy.org, was Kathleen Raine, with whom Dr. Lings maintained a long friendship.

an example of a man who possessed a “genius of energy.”¹⁶ He cited Dr. Lings’ tireless travels, including annual two-week visits to see Schuon, and Lings’ seemingly never-ending travels to the many spiritual communities of disciples. In the six months before his death Lings traveled to Egypt, Dubai, Pakistan, Malaysia, and South Africa, and seekers from as far away as the United States, Singapore, and Australia came to visit him during those travels.

This genius of physical energy was entirely consistent with his contemplative life of inner prayer. Frithjof Schuon also remarked that Lings possessed an “aura of piety,”¹⁷ which manifested itself as a tangible spiritual presence to those in his proximity. This radiation was the result of a lifelong dedication to inner prayer and virtue. After his death Mrs. Catherine Schuon, his friend of over fifty years, remarked that “his aura of piety became an aura of sanctity in the last years of his life.”

Dr. Lings received a stream of continuous visitors when he was at his home outside of London. For the last thirty years of his life he had the custom of inviting guests to his home every Sunday afternoon for tea, followed by a long walk in the fields and woods surrounding his home, followed by dinner. Dr. Lings always served the tea and the evening always ended with prayer.

His prodigious physical vitality continued until the last days of his life. Ten days before his death, he addressed an audience of 3,000 at Wembley Stadium in London on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday. During this event Dr. Lings was presented with another of his many awards, which are too numerous to enumerate. Then four days before his death he was able to host his customary Sunday invitation, although the walk was shortened because he was tired. Two days before his death his strength noticeably declined, but on the night before his death he was still planning to keep a scheduled appointment for a film interview about the Perennialist School. In the early hours of

¹⁶ This comment was made by Mr. Schuon in a private conversation in 1991 shortly after the publication of his article entitled, “To Have a Center” in the book by the same name. The article discusses the phenomenon of genius in its diverse human manifestations.

¹⁷ Personal conversation with Frithjof Schuon in 1995.

Thursday, May 12, he phoned to his next door neighbor. Shortly thereafter he died in prayer in the attendance of that neighbor, Reza Shah-Kazemi.

The following day, May 13, he was buried in his magnificent garden, with the azaleas, rhododendrons, and assorted spring flowers in full bloom. Gardening was a source of great joy for Dr. Lings, and a great contemplative support, so it was entirely fitting that he became the crowning jewel of his own carefully nurtured and resplendent creation.

Despite the unexpected suddenness of his passing, approximately eighty people from around the world dropped everything to attend his funeral. Had the funeral been postponed several days there would not have been sufficient room to hold everyone who wanted to come to show their respect. The funeral of a great man is always the source of sadness for those who are left behind, but it was also the occasion to celebrate a life dedicated to prayer and to selfless actions for others. The reading of a short text written by Frithjof Schuon and of several of Dr. Lings' poems reminded everyone in attendance that the most fitting way to remember such a man is through prayer.¹⁸

On both of the following two evenings Mrs. Leslie Lings was able to see friends and visitors. On the second evening, which was a Sunday, she continued the tradition of having visitors come to her home for refreshments and prayer. On this occasion the visitors were invited to take the customary walk, but everyone preferred to stay in the garden in silent contemplation with its newly crowned jewel. When she reminisced that she had known her husband for 88 of her 92 years of life everyone was reminded how closely she shared her husband's life and work. Despite her personal loss she was radiant with an evident glow and spiritual grace in her eyes. As guests were exchanging their parting greetings with her she said, "Please pray for me." Those prayers are a pleasure in

¹⁸ Two of Dr. Lings' closest friends, Dr. Jean-Louis Michon and Jean-Claude Petitpierre, both attended the funeral. I interviewed both men on film in their respective homes in the two weeks after the funeral. Their comments concerning Dr. Lings have been edited into a multi-media Slide Show that is available at www.worldwisdom.com.

recognition of the way that she and her husband have selflessly lived their lives for the benefit of others, always in the remembrance of God.