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Martin Lings: The Sanctity of Sincerity*

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Who was Martin Lings? I can think of no better way of starting this lecture than by letting Martin Lings himself answer that question. He does so in one of his poems, 'Self-Portrait':¹

Orpheus with his music made
The mountains tremble; he could persuade
The wind to veer, the earth to unfreeze,
The sap to rise up in the trees;
The waters, every living thing
Followed, to hear him play and sing.
But my soul from the dark pall
Of future ages he could not call,
That I might hear his minstrelsy:
The sticks and stones danced, but not I.

Nor was I with the dance possessed
When Indra with his dancers blessed
That land whose jungles are the haunt
Of tiger, peacock, elephant.
They came, their sacred art to unfold:
I was not present to behold
Those movements by no man invented,
To hear those ankle-bells new-minted
In Heaven, resound, as heavenly feet
With rhythmic step the earth did greet.

* This text is adapted from notes for a lecture at the Royal Asiatic Society on 30 November 2009, commemorating the centenary of the birth of Martin Lings (1909–2005). This was the last in a series of three lectures organized by the Temenos Academy and sponsored by the Matheson Trust.

1. *Collected Poems* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2002), pp. 51–3.

I saw not Rama: and I missed
 The sight of Radha, to her tryst
 Stealing at dusk for her Divine
 Beloved. No; it was not mine
 To share that beauty, that holiness,
 Together my two hands to press
 In reverence, not mine to hear
 What made five senses each an ear,
 Thrilled every tree from crown to root,
 The purity of Krishna's flute.

The sacrament I did not take
 From the priest-king Melchizedek,
 Nor stood I by that sacred well
 With Abraham and Ishmael
 In the Arabian wilderness,
 Prayed not with them that valley to bless,
 Stone on stone laid not, that house to build
 Wherewith their prayers have been fulfilled.

I saw not Joseph in his glory;
 I tell, but witnessed not, his story:
 His brothers' guilt, how they did crave
 Forgiveness and how he forgave,
 And Jacob, Leah, all bowed down,
 Eleven planets, sun and moon.
 Their progeny scarce dared to glance
 At Moses' dazzling countenance
 When of the Burning Bush he told.
 For me there was no need to hold
 My lids half-shut: time was my veil,
 Nor can I leap our nature's pale
 To span the years with backward wing,
 That I might hear the Psalmist sing,
 Or gaze with Solomon entranced,
 While Sheba's queen before him danced.

Years passed, but still beyond my reach
 It was, to hear the Buddha preach,
 And when he held up silently
 That flower, he gave it not to me.

Of all the guests less than the least
 I was not to that marriage feast
 Bidden, at Cana in Galilee.
 I did not hear, I did not see
 The words and looks that passed between
 The son and mother: she serene,
 Gently prevailing, and he stirred
 Infinitely deep, by the deep word
 She uttered. But I dare surmise
 That wine enough was in their eyes:
 Wine upon wine those guests drank then.
 Could any be the same again?

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.

In this poem we are graced with a revealing portrait of Martin Lings, and at the same time we are given a taste of the quintessence of the 'perennial philosophy'. The three fundamental themes of this philosophy are there, either explicitly or implicitly: primordiality—together with its prolongation as Tradition; universality of Truth—as manifested by the diverse forms of Revelation; and essentiality—with a veiled reference, at the very end of the poem, to the power of prayer, the means *par excellence* of realizing both primordial perfection, 'the lesser mysteries'; and the essence of the Truth, 'the greater mysteries'.

Let us note another portrait of the soul of Martin Lings. This one is more abstract and indirect, but nonetheless revealing. It comprises the six 'stations of wisdom', as described in the sixth chapter of Frithjof Schuon's book *Stations of Wisdom*: 'renunciation and action, peace and fervour, discernment and union'.² In this chapter one is presented with a masterful exposition of the different facets of spiritual wisdom; an exposition which also serves as an accurate description of the soul of Martin Lings. For many of us, Martin Lings was a living embodiment of these stations of wisdom, and thus compelling proof of the efficacy of the spiritual discipline deriving from the teachings of Frithjof Schuon. Indeed, the story of the life of Martin Lings was one of unwavering fidelity to the teachings of his master, as is made clear in his final work, so aptly named *A Return to the Spirit*, a work to which he put the finishing touches shortly before passing away peacefully at the age of ninety-six.³ There we read of how, as a Christian in the 1930s, the young Lings prayed fervently for a spiritual guide: 'My supplication was always one and the same, that I should find a truly great spiritual Master who would take me as his disciple, initiate me

2. Frithjof Schuon, *The Stations of Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 148.

3. HRH The Prince of Wales wrote a preface to this work in which he stated: 'One of the great privileges of my life has been to know Dr Martin Lings, whom I first met through my patronage of the Temenos Academy . . . he saw beneath the surface of things and helped us to penetrate the veil behind which lies the sacred meaning to so many of life's mysteries.' From the Preface to Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit* (Louisville: Fons Vitae/Quinta Essentia, 2005).

into the Way, and guide me to its End.’⁴ The more he prayed, the more he was directed to the small group of Sufis in Switzerland, led by Frithjof Schuon, whom he met in 1937:

And so I met the answer to my highly demanding prayer. Despite his years – he was only 30 – his appearance corresponded perfectly to all that I had prayed for. But that did not increase my certitude that he was indeed the answer to my prayer, for I was already, by the grace of Heaven, as certain as I could be. Nor has that certitude ever wavered during the 66 wonderful years that I have been privileged to be his disciple.⁵

Martin Lings was then given the Muslim name Abū Bakr, the name of the first caliph of Islam. It is noteworthy that the descriptions of the character of Abū Bakr—mild, gentle and self-effacing outwardly, but possessed of an immense inner strength born of unshakable certitude—remind one of Martin Lings. Just as Lings was as certain as he could be that Schuon was the guide to whom he had been led by Heaven, so Abū Bakr was renowned for the absolute certainty he had in the Prophet’s veracity. Indeed Abū Bakr came to be known by the epithet *al-Ṣiddīq*, which means ‘the one who confirms the truth’, and this epithet was bestowed upon him by the Prophet himself when Abū Bakr confirmed the truth of the Prophet’s claim to have journeyed from Mecca to Jerusalem and back again in a single night. This was the Prophet’s ‘Night Journey’ (*al-Isrā’*), the prelude to his Ascent to heaven (*al-Miʿrāj*). In his peerless biography of the Prophet, Lings cites the response of Abū Bakr to the pagans of Quraysh who came to tell him about this incredible claim, jubilant that Abū Bakr, a respected and wealthy merchant of the tribe, would now renounce his belief in the Prophet:

‘If so he saith’, said Abu Bakr, ‘then it is true. And where is the wonder of it? He telleth me that tidings come to him from Heaven to earth in one hour of the day or the night, and I know him to be speaking the truth. And that is beyond what ye cavil at.’⁶

4. *Ibid*, p. 3. 5. *Ibid*, p. 5.

6. *Muhammad—His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (London: George Allen & Unwin/Islamic Texts Society, 1983), p. 103. According to tradition, Abū Bakr was gifted

The epithet *al-Ṣiddīq* sums up Martin Lings's character completely. It is *ṣīdq*, or sincerity, derived from the same root, which constitutes the principal theme of this lecture. The *ṣiddīqūn*, the sincere confirmers of the Truth, are mentioned in a verse of the Qur'ān which Martin Lings loved to recite, these being virtually the last words that the Prophet Muhammad uttered before his death: 'With the supreme communion in Paradise', he was heard to murmur; then, citing the Qur'ān, '*with those upon whom God hath showered His Favour, the prophets and the saints and the martyrs and the righteous, most excellent for communion are they*' (4:69).

This translation is Martin Lings's own,⁷ and it is very telling that he should have translated *ṣiddīqūn* quite simply as 'saints', as would a Jew translating the cognate Hebrew term *tsaddiqīm*, plural of *tsaddiq*; most translators opt for the word 'truthful' or 'sincere'. For Martin Lings, though, the essence of truthfulness or sincerity is nothing but sanctity; for to be fully sincere in one's beliefs means to be purified of all taint not just of hypocrisy but also egocentricity: it means to be completely effaced in the truths in which one believes such that there are no longer in the soul any 'individualistic coagulations', as he used often to say.⁸ If, as Schuon has said, the Way is the path 'from natural hypocrisy to spiritual sincerity',⁹ we might say that Lings was one who had undertaken that journey and, by the grace of God, reached its end. He had become truly holy, or 'whole'. For, as Lings reminds us, wholeness is in reality inseparable from holiness:

with a prodigious memory and was famed for being 'the most expert of [the tribe of] Quraysh on the genealogy of the tribe' (*The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 6: *Muhammad at Mecca*, trans. and ed. W. M. Watt and M. V. McDonald [Albany: SUNY Press, 1988], p. 86). Anyone who knew Lings well was aware of his extraordinary memory, which hardly faded even into his nineties; and I was not alone in being particularly struck by his detailed knowledge of the genealogy of the royal families of Europe.

7. *Muhammad*, p. 341.

8. It is interesting to note that the great Muslim philosopher-mystic, Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (known as Mulla Sadrā), in his exegesis of the Qur'ānic statement '*those who believe in God and His messengers are the truthful ones (al-ṣiddīqūn) and witness before their Lord*' (57:19), refers to the fact that the truthful are such by virtue of their mystical disclosure (*kashf*) and their complete effacement, the fruit of their spiritual struggle against the lower forces of their own souls. See Sajjad Rizvi, 'Mulla Sadra' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2009 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/mulla-sadra/>.

9. As cited by Lings in *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 90.

To be perfectly well, the soul must be complete. 'Holiness', 'wholeness' and 'health' are in origin the same word and have merely been differentiated in form and in meaning through the fragmentation of language. The virtues of simplicity and sincerity are inseparable from this perfection, for each in its own way means undividedness of soul.¹⁰

Martin Lings was indeed the epitome of utter sincerity: confirming with his penetrating intelligence the truth of the teachings he received from his master; putting into practice with his indomitable will the method deriving from these teachings; and then submitting with all his heart and soul to the transcendent realities and transforming beauties revealed by God as a result of this gift of self to the Truth and the Way. His heart, thus transformed, pulsed with the palpable radiance of holiness, to which most people who came into contact with him at the end of his life attested.

We aim to present this brief sketch of Martin Lings in terms of these three levels: the intelligence, or doctrine; the will, or method; and the heart, or sanctity. We might say, albeit somewhat schematically, that on the plane of the intellect, sincerity translates into veracity; on the plane of the will, sincerity translates into integrity; and on the plane of the heart, sincerity translates into sanctity. But before entering into a brief discussion of these three levels, it would be well to ask ourselves the question: what happens when we meet a saint? Martin Lings answers this question very clearly in the chapter 'Archetypes of Devotional Homage' in his book *Symbol and Archetype*, a chapter which takes one from a *bhaktic* starting point to a most *jnanic* conclusion, from love to gnosis:

. . . 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

10. *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (London: Perennial Books, 1964), p. 36.

nostalgic recognition of a fulfilment which for themselves is also a possibility and a goal to be reached.¹¹

One is reminded here of a *ḥadīth*, or saying, of the Prophet, transmitted by Abū Bakr which states that gazing at the face of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib is an act of worship.¹² This is an expression of what is called in Hinduism *darshan*. The presence of the saint makes one acutely aware of ultimate reality, and of one's own potential to realize the holiness being witnessed or felt through the saint. Contemplating the saint thus awakens the aspiration to be holy oneself, or at least, to be less untrue to the deepest substance of one's own humanity, what the Qur'ān refers to as the *fiṭra*, or primordial human norm, made in the image of God, and therefore holy by nature.

In both 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 Martin Lings's own distinctive personality. The man was indeed, according to most of those who knew him intimately, a saint; in Islamic terms, a 'friend of God' (*walī Allāh*). This is amply expressed in the memorial section of *A Return to the Spirit*. Huston Smith, one of the foremost scholars of comparative religion in the western world, refers to Lings's great biography of the Algerian Sufi master, the Shaykh al-ʿAlawī, entitled *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, and says: 'Those of us who are contributing to it [this book, *A Return to the Spirit*] will in effect be doing our best to enter a tribute to a Sufi saint of the twenty-first century'.¹³ If Islam had anything akin to a formal procedure for canonization, such a procedure would undoubtedly have begun immediately upon the death of Martin Lings in 2005. In the Islamic tradition, however, saints are not canonized after death; rather, they are recognized and revered during their lifetime, and also after their death. 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*.

11. *Symbol and Archetype* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991), p. 53.

12. The saying is recorded in a variety of sources, Shia and Sunni alike. For the latter, see Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tārīkh al-Khulafā'*, tr. H. S. Jarrett, *History of the Caliphs* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1970), p. 97.

13. *A Return to the Spirit*, p. xii.

I. DOCTRINE AND VERACITY¹⁴

One is struck by the spirit of unshakeable certitude that the books of Martin Lings exude, and by the almost tangible sense of the author's own effacement in the truths he so eloquently articulates. In the writings of Martin Lings one feels an intellectual power delivered with a certain lightness of touch; the books therefore express in their own way that combination of spiritual authority and profound humility that so distinctly marked his personality. We will return to his personality in a moment; but to focus on this plane of doctrine, one might well ask what Martin Lings could possibly add to the works of Frithjof Schuon, which according to Martin Lings himself brought the 'perennial philosophy' to a peak of unsurpassable perfection? In one of his books, *The Eleventh Hour*, Lings writes about the works of Frithjof Schuon as follows:

[W]e are conscious of all those positive qualities which belong to the end of an age, in particular of a supreme mastery of summing up and of putting everything in its right place. Again and again, about this or about that, one has the impression that Schuon has said the last word.¹⁵

Let us take a brief look at the way in which Martin Lings's works have contributed to the perennial philosophy. We can do this by considering briefly the three principal themes of this philosophy: primordiality, universality and essentiality. Rather than going into all three themes in detail, let us ask ourselves instead what particular nuance Lings added to their exposition.

Primordiality, or tradition. This principle is fundamentally based on a consciousness of man being made in the image of God. It implies, among other things, a critical awareness of the ways in which modernism—defined as a more or less conscious ideological opposi-

14. Some of the points made in the following pages can be found developed more fully in our two articles, 'A Tribute to Martin Lings—On the Occasion of his 90th Birthday', *Sophia—The Journal of Traditional Studies* 5:2 (Winter 1999); and 'A Message of Hope at the Eleventh Hour—Martin Lings, 1909–2005', in *A Return to the Spirit*, in the section entitled 'In Memoriam'.

15. *The Eleventh Hour* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), p. 93.

tion to the essential elements of religious Tradition—has deformed this image, to the extent that it rejects the values rooted in the divine Revelations inaugurating each of the great religious traditions of the world. Because of this aspect of the perennial philosophy, it is often referred to as ‘traditionalism’, a label which is not particularly accurate, and which leads many to think of the perennial philosophy as being hopelessly nostalgic. However, if we emphasize the word *perennial*, we will see that there is nothing hopeless or utopian or unrealistic about this group of writers. While it is true that they harshly criticize the materialism, consumerism, relativism and nihilism which poison our times, the life and work of the perennial authors are themselves nonetheless testimony to the immensely positive potential for spirituality that is also present in our times. Lings often used to say that humanity has reached its ‘old age’ in this late stage of the *Kali Yuga* (‘Dark Age’),¹⁶ and that this has both its advantages and disadvantages. Its chief advantage is the wisdom that accompanies old age: we know more about all sacred traditions now than ever before. Its chief disadvantage is the decrepitude and senility that can cripple the soul if it yields to the materialistic currents of the present age.¹⁷

In this connection *The Eleventh Hour* is very significant. For the eleventh hour or ‘last days’ in which we live, according to so many prophecies, is characterized not only by darkness, but also by divine mercy, glimmerings of light which are in some strange way rendered 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 focused, and not on the decadence *per se*. 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 (Matthew 20:1–16)—clearly refers to the ‘increase’ of availability of mercy at the end of time, a principle affirmed in Islam by the saying of the Prophet, so often quoted by Lings: ‘He who omits one tenth of the Law in the beginning of Islam will be damned; but he who

16. See R. Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne *et al.* (Ghent NY: Sophia Perennis, 1996), chapter 1, ‘The Dark Age’.

17. An anecdote: When he was about ninety years old, Lings, standing bolt upright, addressed a large audience at a Temenos Academy event, saying words to this effect: Each one of you sitting here today is old. The question is: which aspect of old age are you going to choose: wisdom or senility?

accomplishes one tenth of the Law at the end of Islam will be saved'. Divine mercy super-abundantly compensates for the difficulties of following a spiritual path during a period of terminal decline.

The darkness of our times, or the imminence of the end of the present cycle, was indeed stressed by Martin Lings in his books and discourses: not in order to inculcate a sense of doom and gloom, but rather to precipitate our awareness of the need to take advantage of the immense compensations of divine grace. Every moment, he used to say often, can be transformed into a 'moment of mercy'. In this he is echoing the Sufi principle that one must be *Ibn al-waqt*, son of the moment. One should avail oneself, in every single moment, of all the 'available' mercy, and thus galvanize 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'). As Lings says:

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.¹⁸

The following lines of 'Self-Portrait' show that Lings was not sentimentally attached to Tradition, or rather, to the Revelations which together defined the contours of the different forms of Tradition—even if once he may have been so:

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.

18. *The Eleventh Hour*, p. 12.

No more I say: Would it had been!
 For I have seen what I have seen . . .

This 'vision' leads to the second great theme of the perennial philosophy, that of universality, for as stated above, we are all privileged to witness a veritable kaleidoscope of holiness in all spiritual traditions in a manner scarcely imaginable in earlier ages.

Universality. There are two main points to note here in relation to the contribution made by Lings to the perennial philosophy. On the one hand, he puts right a common misunderstanding about the meaning of universality; and on the other, he stresses the providential role of the Islamic revelation in asserting the principle of universality. To take the misunderstanding first: Many are under the mistaken impression that the universality which is so central a feature of the perennial philosophy is just another form of relativism, of the 'anything goes' variety. Universality is deemed to dilute specificity: one fears that the richness of one's specific religion is sacrificed at the altar of a metaphysical abstraction.

Lings helps to rectify this error in various ways. Let us look, for example, at the way in which he comments on one of the key images used by the perennialists to explain the transcendent unity of religions, that of the circumference and the centre of a circle: the outward forms of the religions are situated on points along the circumference, while their inner mystical or esoteric paths are the radii going from the circumference to the centre. He comments:

Our image as a whole reveals clearly the truth that as each mystical path approaches its End, it is nearer to the other mysticisms than it was at the beginning. But there is a complementary and almost paradoxical truth which it cannot reveal, but which it implies by the idea of concentration which it evokes: increase of nearness does not mean decrease of distinctness, for the nearer the centre, the greater the concentration, the stronger the 'dose'.¹⁹

One is penetrated by the specific essence of one's own faith more completely the closer one comes to the centre, the further one travels

19. *What is Sufism?*, pp. 21–2.

along the path of esoterism; for one receives a more 'con-centrated' dose of this essence, even as one is receiving a more potent dose of the essence of religion as such. This universal essence of religion, symbolized by the ungraspable centre of the circle, is the divine Essence itself, at the threshold of which all specificities—individual souls and particular religions—are transcended. It is only at that centre that all particular essences are indistinguishable, being comprised within the ineffable, undifferentiated unity of their source.²⁰

As regards the essence of the religion of Islam, Martin Lings emphasized its intrinsic universality. That is, in addition to being universal by virtue of its mystical or esoteric core, it also contains an element of universality embedded in its very formal structure, in its founding revelation, the Qur'ān:

All mysticisms are equally universal . . . in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam, and therefore of Sufism, is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up. The Islamic *credo* is expressed by the Qur'ān as belief *in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers*. [II, 285] The following passage is also significant in this context. Nothing comparable to it could be found in either Judaism or Christianity, for example: *For each We have appointed a law and a path; and if God had wished He would have made you one people. But He hath made you as ye are that He may put you to the test in what He hath given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all be brought back and He will then tell you about those things wherein ye differed.* [v:48]²¹

Towards the end of his life, Lings repeatedly and emphatically asserted the importance of this universality as expressed not just in the esoteric

20. Schuon resolves the question of particularity and universality throughout his writings. One of the most striking passages in this connection is the following: 'The Christ of the gnostics is he who is "before Abraham was" and from whom arise all the ancient wisdoms; a consciousness of this, far from diminishing a participation in the treasures of the historical Redemption, confers on them a compass that touches the very roots of Existence' (*Light on the Ancient Worlds: New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. Deborah Casey [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006], p. 57).

21. *What is Sufism?*, pp. 22–3.

or mystical doctrines of Islam but in the Qur'ān itself and in certain sayings of the Prophet. For too long, he said, the exoteric commentators had been 'shouting down' the Qur'ān, not allowing it to 'speak for itself'. What he meant is that the literal meaning of so many verses of the Qur'ān unequivocally expresses a universal message, and that many traditional commentators have subjected these verses to all sorts of exegetical strategies in order to avoid this literal meaning.²²

Essentiality. By this term, we mean the tendency of the perennial philosophy to move from the forms of things, religions included, to their essences. On this plane, we should cite the extraordinary capacity of Martin Lings to go to the essence of such diverse subjects as Shakespearean plays and Qur'ānic calligraphy. But perhaps most significant of all here is his biography of the Prophet, universally acclaimed as the definitive, peerless account of the Prophet in the English language.

Lings was a master of the essential. By this I mean that he not only possessed an acute discernment between the essential and the contingent, the principal and the phenomenal, the absolute and the relative: he was also capable of acting in consequence of this discernment, so that eventually his reflexes and his whole being came to be fashioned thereby. Often he used to say: one must always have a sense of proportions. A correct *sense* of proportions goes beyond merely having a correct *conception* of proportions. This sense should accompany us as completely as do our other senses, so that, in the face of phenomena—of whatever order—we never lose our sense of the principal. The phenomena of this world are always subject to doubt; pure principles pertain to the domain of the indubitable.²³

In each religion there are those who distinguish themselves by their fixation on the essential, to the point where this fixation defines them; and by their refusal to be distracted therefrom by the secondary. In

22. It was for this reason, among others, that I dedicated my *The Other in the Light of the One—The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006) to Martin Lings.

23. Anecdote: When Dr Lings gave a talk on René Guénon, at the Essex Unitarian Church in 1994, no sooner had he uttered the words, 'When I read the books of Guénon in the early thirties it was as if I had been struck by lightning', than the entire church was lit up by a sudden flash of lightning from above, part of the roof of the church being made of glass. While many in the audience gasped at this 'phenomenal' corroboration of his words, he himself hardly batted an eyelid and continued with his lecture as if nothing had happened.

Islam, it is the Sufis who so distinguish themselves as 'the choice they have deliberately and irrevocably made of the Eternal in preference to the ephemeral is not merely theoretic or mental but so totally sincere that it has shaken them to the depth of their being and set them in motion upon the path.' Lings continues:

The Qur'an itself is as a crystallisation of this choice, for it insists without respite on the immense disparity between this lower world and the transcendent world of the Spirit, while on the other hand it continually inveighs against the folly of those who choose the lower in place of the higher, the worse in place of the better. As the opposite of this folly, Sufism could be defined as a sense of values or a sense of proportion. Nor would this be inadequate as a definition, for who in the world, except their counterparts in other religions, can possibly compare with the Sufis for putting first things first and second things second? Analogously, the Qur'an defines itself as *al-Furqân* which could be translated 'the Criterion of Values' or 'the Instrument of Discrimination' or simply 'Discernment'. An essential feature of the Quranic message is the establishment of a hierarchy of values which can serve as a criterion for putting everything in its proper place and as a general basis for drawing conclusions. It does not only distinguish between right and wrong, orthodoxy and error, truth and falsehood, religion and paganism. It also makes a distinction, within the domain of orthodoxy, between those who press eagerly forward, the foremost, and those who observe a certain moderation in their worship.²⁴

The 'foremost', the *sābiqūn* (Qur'ān 56:10) are those who have gone from belief to gnosis, from conception to realization. For Martin Lings, then, to speak of essences is to speak of *realization* of the essential, which takes us to the domain of the will: one must dedicate oneself to 'the one thing needful'. Before proceeding to the next section, one should note that for Lings and the perennialists the form of religion, its laws and rites, is a gateway to its essence and an expression of it. Here one should correct a widespread misinterpretation of essentialism: some have said that such is the stress on the esoteric essence by the perennialists that the exoteric form of religion, the Shari'ah, is

24. *What is Sufism?*, pp. 31–2.

marginalized or even subverted. The following sentence from Martin Lings suffices as refutation: 'The practices of the *tariqa* are in addition, but not in opposition, to what the Shari'ah, the sacred Law, prescribes for every believer'. He then adds this important point: 'Esoterism includes exoterism: failure to carry out strictly the commandments of the Shari'ah would amount to a disqualification for entry into one of the Sufi brotherhoods.'²⁵ Moreover, the outward forms of religion will be grasped as esoteric to the extent that one's vision is esoteric. The following passage from the Shaykh al-'Alawī, as translated by Lings in his magisterial biography, is extremely important:

Remembrance²⁶ is the mightiest rule of the religion The law was not enjoined upon us, neither were the rites of worship ordained but for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God In a word, our performance of the rites of worship is considered strong or weak according to the degree of our remembrance while performing them.²⁷

How, then, does one traverse the path from the exoteric form to the esoteric essence, how does one move from the periphery to the centre along the radius, so that all of one's acts, ritual or otherwise, become expressions of the remembrance of God? The idea of the transcendent unity of religions is certainly not enough, nor is the idea of primordial truth, nor the metaphysical distinction between the essence and form. Such ideas certainly help, but they are situated on the plane of the mind, *a priori*; and as such they call out to be assimilated in depth, realized in the heart. Doctrine needs its methodic complement; the intelligence, awoken to the highest and deepest truths, issues an imperative summons to the will: one must do something about these truths, Lings often used to say: thinking about them must give way to realizing them.²⁸ The illuminating truths perceived by the mind must be harnessed to the realizatory power of the will.

25. *The Book of Certainty* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), p. x.

26. It should be noted that the Arabic *dhikr* means both the principle of the remembrance of God and the practice of the invocation of the divine Name.

27. M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 96–7.

28. Schuon pointedly writes: 'In ratiocination concepts are worn threadbare without any possibility of their being replaced, on this level, by something better. Nothing is

II. WILLING INTEGRITY

As mentioned earlier, Lings stressed that for the soul to be 'whole' it must be 'holy', the two words sharing the same root. This sincerity and integrity, wholeness and holiness are beautifully described by Lings in relation to sacred art. In the following passage he invites us to participate in his own contemplative vision, the fruit of his own perception of sacred art:

When we contemplate a work of truly sacred art, the whole soul comes together as if in answer to an imperative summons. There is no question of any fragmentary reaction, for we cannot marvel enough. Here lies the essence of a sacred civilization, to be forever demanding, in all sorts of ways, that the soul should pull itself together and keep itself together, and in the response of souls to this demand lies one of the great superiorities of the past over the present. To take a very small, yet none the less significant example, when we listen to the dance music of the Middle Ages, even to that of the gayer dances, we do not have in any sense the impression that a fragment of the soul has splintered off rebelliously from the rest. On the contrary, such music conjures up the presence of men and women who in their pleasures could not forget, and did not desire to forget, the fleeting brevity of life and the certainty of death.²⁹

How then are we to restore the wholeness and holiness that we have lost, but which is our deepest birthright? In short, we are called to engage in what the Prophet called 'the Greater Struggle', *al-Jihād al-Akbar*, the struggle against all the lower tendencies of the soul. In his book *What is Sufism?*, Martin Lings writes that only the mystic 'knows what it is to keep up a methodic opposition to his own lower possibilities and to carry the war into the enemy's territory so that the whole soul may be "for God".' The path of exoterism, of the outward practice

more harmful than this mental erosion of a truth; it is as though true ideas took their revenge on anyone who limits himself to a thinking of them' (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James Cutsinger [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007], p. 5).

29. *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, p. 37.

of religion, is described by him as 'a state of truce with occasional desultory skirmishes . . .'³⁰

The means by which we restore our primordial nature, and overcome our fallen second nature, is described in many places throughout the works of Martin Lings. Surprisingly, the nature, means and implications of the spiritual combat are perhaps most explicitly presented in his esoteric interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. Consider what he says about *Hamlet*:

The basic theme of *Hamlet* is summed up in the Prince's own words: 'Virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it.' (III, 1, 118–120) This means: 'It is no use plastering one or two superficial virtues over our old stock, that is, the original sin which permeates our nature, since in spite of all such virtues, we shall continue to reek of the old stock.' But in order to express fully what is in Hamlet's mind here we must add: 'There is only one thing which can effectively wipe out the stench of our old stock and that is the complete reversal of the Fall, total liberation from the grip of the enemy of mankind, in other words, the slaying of the dragon, or more simply, in the language of the play, revenge.'

He continues:

Initiation into the Mysteries is nothing other than the inoculating or grafting of a scion of man's primordial nature onto the old stock of his fallen nature which will thus be effaced, stench and all, provided that the new primordial scion be duly tended and implacably protected against any suckers that the old stock may put forth in an attempt to re-establish itself. That tending and that protection are the rites and disciplines of the Lesser Mysteries, the path of purification from original sin and the recovery thereby of man's Edenic state.³¹

In this light one sees easily how Angelo's development in *Measure for Measure* stands for the radical disjuncture between a horizontal and unconsciously complacent virtue, on the one hand, and a vertical,

30. *What is Sufism?*, p. 30.

31. *The Secret of Shakespeare* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1984), p. 20.

consciously attained spiritual perfection, on the other. Tracing out the path that leads from the first to the second, Lings reveals some of the concrete—and most often unexpected—challenges encountered in the spiritual life, doing so in a series of extremely powerful passages. Angelo's descent into the murky depths of his own soul, as prerequisite for his gaining of a perfection on a higher plane, is a variant on the theme of the mystical 'descent into Hell'. This, however strange it may at first seem, is an inevitable part of purification, of contact with the Spirit that, alone, has the power to purify, to make the soul 'healthy', 'whole' and thus 'holy':

Initiation, followed up by the devotional and ascetic practices that are implicit in it, opens the door to contact with the perfecting and unifying power of the Spirit, whose presence demands that the psychic substance shall become once again a single whole. The more or less scattered elements of this substance are thus compelled to come together; and some of them come in anger, from dark and remote hiding-places, with the infernal powers still attached to them. From this point of view it is truer to say that Hell rises than that the mystic descends; and the result of this rising is a battle between the 'mighty opposites', with the soul as battleground. The mystic fights, by definition, on the side of Heaven, but the enemy will spare no stratagem to seduce him into fighting on the wrong side.³²

Despite this awesome prospect, the victory of the Spirit is inevitable, in the measure of the mystic's sincerity of intent and his fidelity to the Heavenly means of waging the battle. What are these means? Lings speaks of the necessity of wielding 'a sword that has been forged and tempered in Heaven' if one is to overcome the obstacle before the aspirant in the spiritual life, this obstacle being represented in most traditions as 'a gigantic monster with supernatural powers'. He offers this helpful comment on one of the most powerful of these swords, the Divine Name:

... calling on the Name of God, whether it be accompanied by some other experience or not, is the most positive thing in the world

32. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

because it sets up the most powerful vibration towards the Heart. The Prophet said: 'There is a polish for everything that taketh away rust; and the polish of the Heart is the invocation of Allāh'.³³

Polishing the heart with the Name evokes the process of sanctification, which is essentially all about the principle of reflection: the saint does not 'become God', rather, God is as it were 'seen' in the perfectly polished heart of the saint. This leads us to the final level of sincerity, on the plane of the heart.

III. THE HEART: FROM WHOLENESS TO HOLINESS

Let us begin with the following 'divine (*qudsī*) sayings'—that is, sayings in which God speaks in the first person, transmitted by the Prophet, but which are not verses of the Qur'ān:

My earth hath not room for Me, neither hath My Heaven, but the Heart of My believing slave hath room for Me.³⁴

Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near to Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him. And when I love him, I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth, and the Sight wherewith he seeth, and the Hand whereby he graspeth and the Foot whereon he walketh.³⁵

These two sayings were often quoted by Martin Lings, both in his published works and in his oral discourses. Together, they may be said to express the quintessence of spirituality in Islam, the first as regards the objective principle of divine immanence, the presence of God within that depth of consciousness referred to as the heart; the second as regards the effective realization of this immanence through the totality of dedication referred to as 'added devotions'—the most fundamental of which is the *dhikru'LLāh*. The relationship between

33. *What is Sufism?*, p. 59. This saying is found in Bayhaqī's collection of *ḥadīth*.

34. We give here Lings's own translation; *ibid.*, p. 49. Unlike the saying which follows, this one is not found in the exoteric sources of *ḥadīth*; but this has not prevented such eminent spiritual authorities as al-Ghazālī from citing it repeatedly.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 74. This saying is found in the collection of al-Bukhārī.

holy vision and audition, on the one hand, and the *dhikr*, on the other, is implicitly referred to in the final verse of 'Self-Portrait':

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.

The final line of the poem clearly alludes to the words of the Qur'ān: '*He giveth sustenance to whom He will beyond all reckoning*'. This phrase appears at 3:37 and again, in nearly identical form, at 24:38; and one feels that Lings intended these words to evoke for the reader both of these verses. Verse 3:37 is preceded by a description of how Zacharias found food miraculously procured for the Blessed Virgin, and upon asking her whence it came, received from her this reply: '*It is from God. Verily, God giveth sustenance to whom He will beyond all reckoning*'. According to Schuon, 'This reply is the very symbol of the Marian message as it appears in the Qur'an; and even in other passages, in which the name of Mary is not mentioned, this phrase in fact indicates an aspect of the message.'³⁶ This Marian message is fundamentally one of mercy and overflowing generosity, and it is directly connected with the enlightenment of the heart through the *dhikr*—which takes us to verse 24:38, for the key phrase here, describing God's giving of sustenance beyond all reckoning, terminates a passage which begins with the famous verse of light, and in which the *dhikr* figures as a key theme (24:35–8):

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. A similitude of His light is a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is enclosed in a glass; the glass is as it were a shining star. [The lamp] is lit [by the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. The oil well-nigh shineth forth, though fire touch it not. Light upon light! God guideth to His light

36. F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 90.

whom He will; and God striketh similitudes for mankind; and God knoweth all things. In houses which God hath allowed to be elevated, and that His Name be remembered therein, He is glorified in the mornings and in the evenings by men whom neither trade nor merchandise diverteth from the remembrance of God, and from establishing the prayer, and from the bestowing of alms. They fear a day when hearts and eyes will be overturned; [they hope] that God may reward them with the best of what they did, and increase reward for them of His bounty. And God giveth sustenance to whom He will beyond all reckoning.

The key words, '*God giveth sustenance to whom He will beyond all reckoning*' clearly unite the two passages, the one relating to the Blessed Virgin, the other concerning divine light and permanent remembrance.³⁷ We cited above the saying of the Prophet, 'the polish of the Heart is the invocation of *Allāh*'. Imām 'Alī, in one of his most renowned sermons, elaborates on this saying in a comment he makes on verse 24:36, and in so doing takes us closer to the mystery evoked by the last line of 'Self-Portrait'. He cites the words, '*men whom neither trade nor merchandise diverteth from the remembrance of God*', and then says: 'Truly God has made the remembrance (*al-dhikr*) a polish for the hearts, by which they³⁸ hear after being deaf, and see after being blind.'³⁹

Martin Lings was indeed one who had polished his heart—for nigh on seven decades—with the remembrance of God: what he saw and heard with this heart went far beyond what can be imagined by those whose hearts are rusted over with vice, clouded by forgetfulness, bound by the limits of conventional cognition, or veiled by time, to use the metaphor in 'Self-Portrait'. So when at the end of his poem Lings tells us that he no longer feels deprived of the beautiful revelatory events from which he was separated by time and space, and that he has seen what he has seen, heard what he has heard, we are

37. See Schuon's remarkable chapter, 'The Wisdom of Sayyidatna Maryam', in *ibid.*, for further discussion of these themes.

38. It is important to note that the pronoun here refers to 'the hearts' (referred to in Arabic grammar in the feminine singular), not to 'the men'.

39. This comment comes in sermon 213 of the *Nahj al-balāgha*, as cited in our *Justice and Remembrance—Introducing the Spirituality of Imam 'Alī* (London: IB Tauris, 2005), p. 142.

clearly intended to understand that he has indeed witnessed these events, but on a different plane, and with something deeper than the outward senses. While the senses register the forms of revelation, the heart assimilates their essences. For if the heart, alone in creation, 'contains' God, then *a fortiori*, it must be capable of containing and thus perceiving His revelations. Indeed, according to the Qur'ān, the only real way of perceiving things of the spirit is with the heart: '*It is not the eyes that are blind, rather, blind are the hearts within the breasts*' (22: 46). Lings comments on this verse as follows:

This shows—and it would be strange if it were otherwise—that the Quranic perspective agrees with that of the whole ancient world, both of East and of West, in attributing vision to the heart and in using this word to indicate not only the bodily organ of that name but also what this corporeal centre gives access to, namely the centre of the soul, which itself is the gateway to a higher 'heart', namely the Spirit . . . In virtue of being the centre of the body, the heart may be said to transcend the rest of the body, although substantially it consists of the same flesh and blood. In other words, while the body as a whole is 'horizontal' in the sense that it is limited to its own plane of existence, the heart has, in addition, a certain 'verticality' for being the lower end of the 'vertical' axis which passes from the Divinity Itself through the centres of all the degrees of the Universe.⁴⁰

The heart, then, is the point of human consciousness which stands at the threshold of infinity. As such, it is a *barzakh*, or isthmus, connecting two otherwise incommensurable domains. The heart, alone within creation, has 'room' to contain God inasmuch as it is the gateway from the created to the uncreated, the finite to the infinite, the human to the divine—to the 'kingdom of God' which is 'within you' (Luke 17:21). Another saying of Jesus from the Gospel sheds further light on the relationship between sincerity, sanctity and the heart: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matthew 5:8). The word 'pure' in this saying would be translated into Arabic as *mukhlis*, which is

40. *What is Sufism?*, p. 48. One might note also the following statement by Imām 'Alī: 'Eyes see Him not through sight's observation, but hearts see Him through the verities of faith' (*lā tudrukuhu'l-uyūn bi-mushāhadati'l-ʿyān, wa lākin tudrukuhu'l-qulūb bi-ḥaqāʾiqi'l-īmān*, cited in our *Justice and Remembrance*, p. 119).

synonymous with 'sincere'. In Arabic, 'sincerity' is translated both as *ṣidq* and *ikhhlās*, for to be 'purely' for God—without any 'taint' of worldliness or egotism—is to be 'sincerely' for God. One could therefore paraphrase this saying from the Gospel as follows: 'blessed are the sincere, for they shall see God'.

In regard to the poem, one can apply this principle to the question of what it is that is seen and heard: the heart of Martin Lings, polished ceaselessly by the remembrance of God, came to 'see' and 'hear' the divine substance of the different revelations, not in time and space, according to the empirical dimensions of vision and audition, but in imaginal or principial mode, transcending chronological time and physical space, and entering into that limitless field of theophanic vision, the heart. The Qur'ān alludes to this kind of vision in the following verse, which posits two ways by which God's 'signs' or 'revealed verses'—the word *āyāt*, plural of *āya*, comprising both meanings⁴¹—can be manifested: '*We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves, until it be clear to them that He is the Truth*' (41:53).⁴²

God has revealed His signs as verses of scripture, but He has also revealed His signs in the world around us, and in the world within, the macrocosm and the microcosm. One is invited to read the verses of the Qur'ān, to interpret all phenomena as symbols, and to perform an exegesis of one's own soul, thus deciphering the content of its conceptions and inspirations. But what is also implied is the possibility that the outwardly revealed scriptures can be spiritually perceived, with the eye and the ear of the heart, and in the time and space proper to the heart; it is not just a question of empirical vision and audition of the revelations in outward time and space. As Ibn al-ʿArabī says, in what are possibly some of the most celebrated lines of his poetry:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture
for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables
of the Torah and the book of the Koran.

41. It can also mean 'miracle'.

42. We are using here the translation given by Lings; cf. *The Holy Qur'an—Translations of Selected Verses* (Cambridge: RAABIT and Islamic Texts Society, 2007), p. 132.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels
take, that is my religion and my faith.⁴³

Imaginal vision was mentioned above. These lines of Ibn al-ʿArabī show us what imaginal—as opposed to imaginary—vision means. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's terms, the 'imaginal' faculty translates that dimension of the imagination which is independent or 'separable' (*munfaṣīl*), and opens out onto the objective, real domain of archetypal images (*ʿālam al-khayāl*), itself the outward deployment of the purely spiritual or intelligible realities, the archetypes as such (*al-aʿyān al-thābita*); which latter are the counterparts of the divine qualities (*al-ṣifāt*) which, in myriad configurations, display something of the 'hidden treasure' of the divine Essence. The other dimension of the imagination is that which is 'attached' (*muttaṣīl*) to the individual subject and is thus purely subjective, and relates to what is 'imaginary'. Henry Corbin refers to the *ʿālam al-khayāl* as the *mundus imaginis*, an apt translation indeed; and he depicts this world as being far more real than the material world, being intermediary between the spiritual and the physical realms, reflecting the archetypes of the spiritual world in images that can be grasped by the imaginal faculty within the heart.⁴⁴ The heart can receive or be 'capable' of⁴⁵ 'every form' because of its infinite capacity. It is interesting that Ibn al-ʿArabī begins with the 'form' of a pasture for gazelles before speaking of specifically religious symbols: the purified heart sees first the 'signs upon the horizons'—the beauties of virgin nature, that primordial revelation of God, of which all subsequent revelations are echoes and reminders. It is in this light that all of the poems of Lings which deal with descriptions of the natural world and its rhythms should be appreciated. For example, in 'The Garden' we read:

Behold, eloquent, eloquent the peacocks.
Sharper their beauty than their sharpest note.

43. *The Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1978), p. 52.

44. See Corbin's writings for an inspiring presentation of Ibn al-ʿArabī's view of the imagination, especially his *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. R. Manheim (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 179–283.

45. The Arabic here is *qābil*, from the same root as the word for heart, *qalb*, and means 'capable of receiving/accepting'.

The message conveyed so eloquently by the beauty of the peacock?

Remembrancers of Love, mirrors of Beatitude –
Giver All-Bountiful. Most blessed is Thy Name!

Reminding us of the love and revealing the beatitude of the All-Bountiful, the beauties of the natural world are the original, primordial forms assumed by Revelation—not forgetting that man himself constitutes the most profoundly revealing of all such revelations of primordial nature, man being made ‘in the image of God’. The relationship between the primordial beauty of virgin nature and divine revelation is made clearer later in the poem, in a description of willow trees:

At the water’s edge, eloquent the willows
That deep in the earth their deep-drinking roots,
Evermore thirsty, evermore are satiate.
Leaning, they let down their long tresses,
*Images of the Mercy of earthward leaning Heaven.*⁴⁶

The words which complete verse 41:53, however, take us from the imaginal to a higher, metaphysical, degree of vision: *‘Is it not sufficient that thy Lord is Witness (Shahād) of all things?’* The only true witness, the only true visionary, is God Himself: it is He who is the ‘sight’ by which the servant sees. Thus, when one speaks of the pure of heart ‘seeing’ God, this vision is in reality God’s vision of Himself: God ‘sees’ Himself in the spotless mirror of the heart of the saint. The consciousness of the heart is thus figuratively the eye by which divine vision is accomplished. In other words, the eye by which the heart sees God is in reality that eye by which God sees Himself through the heart. One understands better in this light the *ḥadīth qudsī* that there is ‘room’ in the heart for God. To say that God is somehow ‘contained’ in the heart means, not that a part of God is physically located in the heart, but that the universal presence of God—which cannot be circumscribed by any form—is faithfully and fully reflected by the pure heart: God can metaphorically be described as being ‘in’ the heart in the same way that an object is ‘in’ the mirror that reflects it. This image is one of

46. *Collected Poems*, pp. 26–7 (emphasis added).

the least inadequate means of conveying the inexpressible mystery of the synthesis between transcendence and immanence. It evokes the immanence of God without detriment to His transcendence: the object reflected is distinct from its image in the mirror—God transcends the heart—but the image in the mirror is nothing but the object—the deepest secret (*sirr*) of the heart is God. The content of the heart, then, is ‘divine’, it does indeed ‘contain’ God; but God is not the heart.

The saint knows that he, *qua* individual, is nothing, God alone being real. Knowledge of his relative reality as a mirror of the one and only light of God is of necessity accompanied by the more decisive awareness that the mirror is nothing in the absence of the light it reflects. This ‘objective and disinterested awareness’, to quote Schuon, ‘dissolves ambition and vanity at their very roots’,⁴⁷ resulting in that mode of humility which so crucially defines sanctity. ‘*There is nothing like Him*’, we are told in the Qur’ān, but in the very next words comes the paradoxical complement to this affirmation of divine transcendence, ‘*and He is the Hearer, the Seer*’ (42:11). God alone is, all else is illusory; thus whatever there is of ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’ in creation is His hearing and His seeing, whether one is aware of it—through effacement of the illusion of the self—or not. This is the import of Lings’s comment on the *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God is described as constituting the faculties of the servant:

It cannot be concluded from this Tradition [the *ḥadīth qudsī*] that this identity was not already there, for the Divinity is not subject to change. The ‘change’ in question is simply that what was not perceived has now been perceived.⁴⁸

The saint’s perceptions are now perceived to be those of God: there is no consciousness or being save that of God—‘*Is it not sufficient that thy Lord is Witness to all things?*’ is now understood to mean: ‘Is it not sufficient that thy Lord is *the sole* Witness of all things?’ God is not just ‘*the Hearer, the Seer*’, but He, alone, hears and sees. All human acts of witnessing or cognition are metaphorical by comparison, more

47. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. W. Stoddart (Pates Manor: Perennial Books, 1990), p. 41.

48. *A Sufi Saint*, p. 129

apparent than real. *'Vision attaineth Him not; He attaineth all vision'* (6:103). Only the saint is fully aware of these mysterious concomitants of immanence, or this ultimate implication of *lā ilāha illa'llāh*. 'No God but God' is understood to mean: there is no reality but the Real.

So when Martin Lings speaks in his 'Self-Portrait' about what he has 'seen' and 'heard', we are justified, metaphysically, in speaking of these as divine visions and auditions—divine both subjectively and objectively: as the Sufi saying has it, 'only He to whom nothing is similar can see Him to whom nothing is similar'.⁴⁹ We return to the paradoxical verse cited above: *'There is nothing like Him; and He is the Hearer, the Seer.'* The saint knows that he is, precisely, 'nothing';⁵⁰ and for this very reason, he knows that God, alone, is the Hearer and the Seer, not just of His own Essence, but also of His theophanies, the effusions of His Self-disclosures in and as creation. The saint participates in this divine vision in the very measure of his extinction, a truth expressed in the title of one of Ibn al-^ḤArabī's treatises, 'Extinction in Contemplation'. At the very end of this treatise, he reveals the deepest meaning of contemplation by means of a stunning esoteric interpretation of a renowned *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, his definition of 'spiritual virtue' (*iḥsān*): 'that you should worship God as if you saw Him; and if you see Him not, He [nonetheless] sees you.' The Arabic wording is such that, by effecting a stop in the middle of the phrase 'if you see Him: not' (*in lam takun: tarāhu*), the meaning is completely transformed into: 'if you are not, you see Him'.⁵¹

We are perhaps now in a better position to understand what Martin Lings intends by the word 'be' at the end of this, the final verse of the poem 'The Elements':

Truth, All-Knowing, Eternal, Lord
Of the Absolute Day beyond day and night,

49. This is a famous saying by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, and is quoted frequently by Ibn al-^ḤArabī.

50. Meister Eckhart: 'All creatures are pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something, or anything at all, but that they are pure nothing.' Cited from *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O'C. Walshe (Dorset: Element Books, 1979), Note C, no. 26.

51. See Michel Vālsan, trans., *Le Livre de l'Extinction dans la Contemplation (Kitāb al-Fanā' fī'l-mushāhada)* (Paris: Les Editions de l'Oeuvre, 1984), pp. 48–9.

Infinite Beatitude, answer us, guide us
 Over the surge of this sea of shadows, this vast
 Ocean of echoes, that on the ultimate shore
 We may behold, and hear, and have, and be.⁵²

For Martin Lings, whose poetry was the fruit of his metaphysics, to 'be', in the fullest sense, could only mean absolute, infinite and perfect being, realization of which requires the extinction of relative, finite and imperfect existence. As he says: 'If God alone is Real, God alone *is*, and there is no being but His Being.'⁵³ One need not therefore pose the alternative, as did Hamlet: 'To be, or not to be'. Rather, it is a question of combining a negation with an affirmation: 'Not to be, in order to be'; the negation of apparent being, for the sake of true Being: *lā ilāha illa'Llāh*.

52. *Collected Poems*, p. 37. 53. *What is Sufism?*, pp. 64-5.

