

SHAYKH ABU BAKR SIRAJ AL-DIN (MARTIN LINGS): A TRIBUTE

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With the death of Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din (1909-2005) the traditionalist school has lost one of its greatest expositors and the world as a whole has lost one of its leading spiritual lights. His long life became extinguished gently but not before his many works, lectures, and most of all spiritual presence and direction illuminated a whole world in both East and West. Highly gifted as a young man for language and literature and also drawn deeply to religion, he became closely associated with C. S. Lewis at Oxford. It was his thirst for universal truth and intelligence for understanding pure metaphysics, however, that caused him to leave the strong influence of Lewis for the pure expression of the perennial philosophy which he discovered in the writings of René Guénon in the 1930s. C. S. Lewis was highly opposed to Guénon, as his collected letters reveal!, and it is to the great credit of the young Lings and his sense of discernment to be able to break the strong spell of the imposing figure of Lewis for what appeared at Oxford as the far away horizons of traditional doctrines. In the late 1980s when we were walking together at his invitation on the Addison Walk at Oxford, Lings began to reminisce about his days at the University and he told me how disappointed Lewis was when the young Lings left Christianity for Islam and the universal verities of Sufism and told Lings, "What a loss for Christianity!" As it was, Lings embraced Islam not to deny but to reconfirm the deepest and oft-forgotten truths of Christianity as his works reveal amply and he made great contributions to that religion.

The discovery of traditional writings was to lead him to the circle of Frithjof Schuon, to the embracing of Islam in 1938 in Switzerland through Titus Burckhardt, and to entry into the path of Sufism. It was shortly before the Second World War that he set out for Egypt where he met Guénon (Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Yahya) and became closely associated with him, becoming in fact like a member of his household. But what was most important in Lings’ life was that became a disciple of Shaykh ‘Isa Nur al-Din

Ahmad (Frithjof Schuon) to whom he remained extremely devoted and faithful until Schuon's death and even afterwards.

Sidi Abu Bakr, as he was then called, did not only love Islam, the religion which God had chosen for him, but also the Arabic language which he mastered as well as traditional Arab culture. He was at once very English and deeply Arabized on a certain level, but of course his goal was to transcend all forms, those of his ethnic background and those of the religion whose forms he had adopted as the means to ascend to that Reality which is above all forms. He was planning to live in Cairo until the end of his life but the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 forced him to return to England. With all his love for the English countryside and his lovely garden which was in full bloom when he died in May (and where he was buried), he always considered Egypt also to be his home. For the past twenty years we visited Cairo together annually and I always felt that he was as much at home there as he was in his home in Westerham, Kent. Once we were visiting the holy site of Ra's al-Husayn in Cairo, which is the sacred center of the city. As we approached the grill surrounding the tomb of the grandson of the Prophet, he said, "When I am here, I feel that this is where I belong."

Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din spent over sixty years in actively following the spiritual path and his whole life was dedicated to God and the way that leads to Him. He traveled regularly in the old days to visit Shaykh 'Isa in Lausanne and later in America and also he would journey extensively throughout the Islamic world on a regular basis from Morocco to Malaysia with the anchor always being Egypt. Gradually his fame grew throughout the Islamic world, even more so than in England and the perfume of his presence is to be sensed even now not only in certain circles in the West, but especially in numerous Islamic countries where many tributes were made to him after his death. Now that he has left this lowly plane for the numinous abode, one might pause to weigh the significance of his writings within the traditional school without forgetting the even more important significance of his spiritual legacy embedded in the hearts and minds of his many disciples, friends and even unknown persons touched by his light from afar. As a Persian poem states,

Do not seek after our death our dust in the earth,

Our tomb is in the breasts of the people of gnosis.

After the three founding figures of the traditionalist school, that is, Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon, Lings is without doubt one of the most significant voices of the next circle of this assembly. While being closely drawn to the works of Guénon, one of which he translated into English after the Second World War, Lings was drawn more to the writings of Schuon which he followed scrupulously and assiduously. In comparison to Burckhardt, who was also a major disciple of Schuon, Lings was more attracted to the field of literature and Burckhardt more concerned with cosmological sciences while both made extremely important contributions to Sufi studies. Also Schuon and Burckhardt were both more interested in philosophy than was Lings, while all three were of course deeply immersed in the *sophia perennis*. Schuon was favorable to being called a "Teutonic philosopher" in public. One can hardly imagine Lings accepting to be called an "English philosopher."

Like Schuon and Burckhardt, Lings was also very much interested in traditional art but in a somewhat diverse way. Schuon and Burckhardt were both remarkable painters and designers although in different media while Lings, like Schuon, was a very gifted poet. And in contrast to the other two, Lings was more concerned with literary art as seen in his unparalleled study of Shakespeare. One might say that the artistic genius of Lings oscillated between Quranic calligraphy and English literature as seen in the title of his two most important works on art: *Splendours of Qur'anic Calligraphy and Illumination* (the title of the new edition of this unique work which appeared through the auspices of Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation in 2004) and *The Secret of Shakespeare*. Furthermore, in the context of art one should not forget his splendid poetry contained not only in the *Collected Poems*, but also in the translations of Sufi poetry in the last of his works to appear before his death, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*, and in his translation of some of the poems of Shaykh al-'Alawi in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*. Concerning the latter, Frithjof Schuon, who did not praise things easily, once told me, "This should be a model for the translation of Sufi poetry."

The other works of Shaykh Abu Bakr can be divided into two categories: one dealing with general traditional themes and the other more specifically

with Islam. The first category includes his brilliant and provocative work *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* which is a critique of many of the errors of the modern world following such books as *The Crisis of the Modern World* of Guénon and *Light on the Ancient Worlds* of Schuon and many of their other writings; *Symbols and Archetypes* which reveals his deep interest in symbolism and which summarizes in masterly fashion the traditional doctrine of symbols (he also played a major role in the English translation of Guénon's *Fundamental Symbols*); *The Eleventh Hour* in which he dealt with eschatological questions about which Schuon did not choose to write publicly; and his very last work, *A Return to the Spirit*, which has not as yet been published. All of these works, along with many articles on diverse traditional subjects, especially symbolism, are among the most precious writings in the traditional cannon.

To the second category belong his first published book, *The Book of Certainty*, a Sufi commentary on many verses of the Qur'an and certain *hadiths*, which has become a classic and is still widely read after over half a century since it was first published; his incomparable biography of the Prophet of Islam, *Muhammad—His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, which nearly all Muslims consider to be the best biography of the Prophet in a European language and for which he is widely known in the Islamic world; *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, which again is a unique masterpiece; *What is Sufism?*, which is an eloquent and penetrating work dealing with the most profound aspects of the Sufi tradition; and his short, personal and moving essay *Mecca Before Genesis Until Now*. Except for the last work which appeared recently, all the other works in this category are not only known in the West but are also widely appreciated in the Islamic world where many of them have been translated into various Islamic languages. Also again under this category one must mention many articles of the greatest intellectual and spiritual significance.

In the Islamic world Shaykh Abu Bakr was seen as one of the champions of authentic Islam in the West as reflected in the many reports of his death in various Islamic countries. He brought many Muslims back to their own religion and opened their eyes to the spiritual grandeur of Sufism. In Turkey several of his books rendered into Turkish continue to be read by a large audience. In Iran he is practically a household name among scholars and

many of his books which have been translated into Persian remain very popular. A similar situation holds true for Pakistan where the Suheyl Academy has made many of his works available in a local edition in English which is widely read in that land, making translations into Urdu less necessary, although some of the titles have also been rendered into Urdu! . Among other Islamic countries the influence of Shaykh Abu Bakr's works are to be seen particularly in Malaysia and Bosnia.

One would expect that the Arabic zone of Islamic civilization would be where Shaykh Abu Bakr would be best known considering his years of residence in Egypt and frequent later journeys to that country, as well as numerous visits to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and several other Arab countries. But as in the case of other traditional authors, so in his case, less attention has been paid to them than in other major Islamic countries such as Turkey, Iran and Pakistan although again a few of Shaykh Abu Bakr's works have been rendered into Arabic. This having been said, it is necessary to state that he was nevertheless well known and highly respected among major Sufi masters and '*ulama*' of al-Azhar in Egypt and also within Sufi circles in other Arab lands, especially the Shadhiliyyah in the Maghrib.

In the West he had many readers among those in search of traditional truth in general and also among the newer generation of Muslims living in the West for many of whom he was the foremost exemplar of a Western Muslim with the virtues which the religion has sought to inculcate in its followers on the basis of the Prophetic model. Hamzah Yusuf, perhaps the foremost and best known American Muslim figure who writes and speaks about Islam, came to Islam when he was only seventeen years old through the writings of Shaykh Abu Bakr and went to visit him shortly before the latter's death. He was deeply impressed by Shaykh Abu Bakr's saintly presence and considered him as the "prototype" of a truly Muslim Westerner.

As for non-Muslims in the West who constitute the majority of his readers, they are of diverse backgrounds and interests. Many are attracted to him as a member of the traditionalist circle, and having read Guénon, Schuon, Burckhardt and others have turned naturally to Lings' writings. Others are attracted particularly to his works on Islam and Sufism. It must not be forgotten that he played an important role in bringing many

Westerners to the Sufi tradition and of course to Islam. There is no doubt that there is a distinct Muhammadan *barakah* to his writings. And yet others have been attracted to his poetry and concern for literature. Here his work on Shakespeare has played a unique role. Many people in England know him only through this work which revealed the inner meaning of the plays for the first time to many of the lovers of the Bard and even to major Shakespearean actors.

His long and fruitful association with the circle of Kathleen Raine and the Temenos Academy, of which he was a fellow, was mostly related to this aspect of Lings' interests. He continued to give lectures at the Temenos Academy to practically the end of his life. They were always very well received and were in fact landmark events in the cultural calendar of London. Some of them were attended by HRH The Prince of Wales who was one of his great admirers.

Once I asked Shaykh Abu Bakr why he continued to be so much concerned with Shakespeare. He 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. Indeed he himself sought to keep alive Shakespearean English especially in his poetry and use of the language at the highest level of its possibilities.

The influence of Lings in the West is not confined to the English-speaking world. Many of his works have been translated over the years into French, Italian, Spanish, German and other European languages. He is in fact very well known in various European countries both among those drawn to the study of tradition and within the European Muslim community. Also in recent years his works have played a general role in presenting an authentic and in depth view of Islam for the general European public drawn to this subject and faced at the same time with whole libraries of works which are either shallow or based on ignorance, misinformation or disinformation.

Few have had such a long life devoted to God and the spiritual life and also bearing so much fruit in the form of books, articles and lectures from which the world about them could benefit both intellectually and spiritually as did Shaykh Abu Bakr. His life was totally dedicated to God, the spiritual path and those who sought to walk upon that path. He was indeed what Rumi called *mard-i kbuda*, that is, a man of God. In him piety and intelligence, knowledge and love were combined. He was given the gift of speaking eloquently and of writing eloquently. He left behind many works of unusual light and beauty combined with scholarly and intellectual rigor, works that *will continue to emanate grace. But his most beautiful work was the shaping of his own soul over whose perfection he had worked assiduously during a very long life. Finally he was able to present this most important of his efforts to God. May God be pleased with him and make His Mercy to descend upon him. Radi Allah " 'anhu"*.

Thou Hast Departed

How sad to hear that thou hast departed,

Leaving this lowly world for the luminous beyond.

Thy gentle voice, uttering words of wisdom slowly.

Deliberately like honey being gently poured,

Not to be heard again in this transient realm.

Nor thy writings new to be beheld by eager eyes,

Accustomed to the outpouring of pearls of wisdom,

From thy gracious pen for decades on end.

How in days of old we circumambulated the Ka'bah.

*And wandered amidst the turquoise blue mosques of Isfahan.
How we paid homage to the saints of Marrakesh,
Walking in remembrance to those sacred sites away hidden.
How oft we visited holy places in Cairo and celebrated His Glory,
On continents stretching from East to West.
These joyous moments are to be no more here below,
How sad then to hear that thou hast departed.
And yet joyous it is indeed to recall thy long life,
A life so rich, bearing so much spiritual fruit,
That has nourished souls from near and far.
Thou hast departed but thy words and memories remain,
Etched on the tablet of our hearts, on the substance of our souls.
Dear friend of God, may the doors of His Grace upon thee open.
May we again by the Kawthar meet, if He wills.
There to contemplate in harmony the infinite Beauty,
The dazzling Splendor of the Face of the Friend.*

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Written a day after the death of Shaykh Abu Bakr, Siraj al-Din al-Shadhili, al-Darqawi, al-‘Alawi, al-Maryami—*radi Allahu ‘anhu*—to whom this poem is dedicated.