

# THE SCHOLAR POET SH. ABU BAKR SIRAJ AL-DIN (DR. MARTIN LINGS)

Muhammad Suheyl Umar

Shaykh Abu Bakr has torn off the cloak of his mortal frame and flown to the Friend. A spirit that has now been freed from the chains of bodily existence, and has re-entered the home from which it had but briefly departed. *Inna li'Laah wa Inna ilayhi raji'un*. After a long life of unswerving devotion to the Sacred, he passed away to the abode of peace on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2005 at the age of 96. The Iqbal Academy Pakistan wants to express its condolences to all his admirers. It is personal loss to me. These are the words that are expected to be said when one is writing about the demise of such a renowned and illustrious man of letters as Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din known as Dr Martin Lings. But when I utter these words they take on a special and in a sense unique personal significance since it was because of his books that I am “known in the gates when I sit among the elders of the land”. However it is not the details of his books that I intend to present to you at the present. These details along with his brief CV are appended to this obituary. I would rather say a few words about the insights that inform and the spirit that infuses his works. With this end in view I have taken as my point of departure a poem that was written 72 years ago. Early in his life Dr Martin Lings made a prayer which is now included in his *Collected Poems*. It provides us with a rare insight into his personality and sums up the direction and content of his entire life work.

*Many have sought what now I seek, and few have won;*

*Yet not the less I am driven to pray: pause in thy fleeing*

*While I have breath, and call to me, and lead me on*

*Into that garden where the Muses sing and dance,*

*That I may fill mine ears with sound, mine eyes with seeing.*

*And make for men some deep enduring utterance.*

And the *deep enduring utterance* he has made indeed and we take this as the author's avowal of an intention which lies behind not only his poems but all that he has written on Islam, Sufism, spirituality and religion.

This intention was coupled with another insight: In the West human intelligence, generally speaking, had come to be left out of religion. It no longer participates in the things of the spirit, and in what ever he wrote, Dr Martin Lings was acutely conscious of the need to express spiritual truths in such a way as to win back the intelligences of virtually intelligent men and women for the only object that could truly satisfy them, namely Divine Reality, the Object for which intelligence exists. This is what he has tried to do through his works in a world increasingly rife with heresy and pseudo-religion with the keen awareness that "Knowledge saves only on condition that it enlists all that we are... Metaphysical knowledge is sacred. It is the right of sacred things to demand of man all that he is." Hence Comprehension, Concentration, Conformation.

It is thus that we sense, in the books of Dr Martin Lings, the imprint of his own unmistakable, elegant style, a certain flavour or taste (*dhawq*), bespeaking a particular spirit or inspiration. Reading his books, one is struck both by the unshakable certitude that pervades them, 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 marks his personality, and so deeply impresses itself upon all those who have the privilege of coming within the sphere of his influence.

His works could be divided into two categories. There are certain works which clearly fall into the category of commentary upon, and introduction to, the writings of the earlier sages and the writers in the perennialist school: such works as *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, *Symbol and Archetype*, and *The Eleventh Hour*. Then there are books which are the result of the application of the principles of the perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis*) to

specific delimited fields, marking his own particular affinities and, indeed, genius. It is in this category of works that his books have excelled all other comparable works. First and foremost one must mention his magisterial account of the life of the Prophet; then his revealing book on Shakespeare's plays; his work *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* is also second to none; and we would also include in this category his book on *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century, Shaykh al-Alawi*, arguably the finest biography of a Sufi in the English language. In the words of a reviewer:

“In reading Dr Martin Lings’ *Muhammad*, we detect an alchemical effect in his narration and composition which so evenly combines scholarly accuracy with poetic passion. Lings is scholar poet.”

What his book on the Prophet did for one's understanding of the phenomenon of prophethood, Martin Lings' book on the Shaykh al-'Alawi, one might say, did for that of sanctity in Islam.

*The Book of Certainty*, a little gem which refracts for us some of the most essential elements of Sufi gnosis based on traditional Qur'anic esoteric exegesis. *The Eleventh Hour*, the urgency of the need for spiritual action is particularly stressed. Here we are given not simply an explanation of 'The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern World in the Light of Tradition and Prophecy', as the subtitle of the book promises; we are also shown how the current crisis, severe and far-reaching though it is, sows the seeds of its own undoing, at least insofar as the individual is concerned.

It might be said about the books on Islam written by Dr Martin Lings that through these books one is given a series of particularly potent “doses” of the concentrated essence of the religion. The key for comprehending the Islamic works of our author taken as a whole— whether it be the Qur'an, the Prophet, Sufi saints, Sufi doctrines — whatever be the subject at hand, his manner of treating this subject always carries the reader from the realm of forms to that of the Essence, from the particular to the Universal, from the symbol to the Archetype.

This brings me to mention that in his first book on Sufism, written many years ago, Dr Martin Lings wrote, with reference to the Qur'anic

descriptions of the celestial Gardens: “To speak of the Gardens and Fountains of paradise, as also of its Rivers, Fruits and Consorts, is to speak the Truth, whereas to speak of such blessings in this world is only a manner of speaking, for the Realities are in Heaven and what we see here-below are only the remote shadows of Reality.” He adds: “The shadow returns to the Substance and, for those with eyes to see, but best things of this world—and that is the criterion of their excellence—are already as it were winged for return to their celestial Source. It is the function of art, in portraying earthly objects, to portray mysteriously at the same time something of their ‘wings’ and thus make the *deep enduring utterances*.

Dr Martin Lings prayed for making the *deep enduring utterance* in 1932. Centuries ago, Milton in his *Paradise Lost* (Book II-17; Book III –51) wrote of a vision which would then be translated into poetry. Milton’s verses are strongly reminiscent of what I quoted earlier from Dr Martin Lings.

*And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all Temples th’ upright heart  
and pure,*

*Instruct me, for thou know’st: / So much the rather thou celestial light*

*Shine inward and the mind through her powers / irradiate, there plant eyes, all  
mist from thence*

*Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight.*<sup>324</sup>

## Curriculum Vitae

Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj ad Din) was born at Burnage, Lancashire, in 1909. After taking a degree in English at Oxford in 1932 he spent a year in Poland giving English lessons and then was made lecturer in

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<sup>324</sup> John Milton, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Mass., USA, 1941, p. 155 and 199.

Anglo-Saxon and Middle English at the University of Kaunas in Lithuania. He entered Islam in 1938. After four years he went to Egypt and was given a lectureship in English Literature at Cairo University where he lectured mainly on Shakespeare. In 1952 he returned to England and became once more an undergraduate, this time at London University, where he took a degree in Arabic. From 1970-74 he was Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books at the British Museum (in 1973 his department became part of the British Library) where he had also been in special charge of the Arabic manuscripts and printed books since 1955. He was consultant to the World of Islam Festival, 1976. He has written extensively on Islam and allied themes. He is widely travelled and has participated in various Islamic conferences from time to time. He is Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and member of its council and also a member of the British Museum Society.

His publications include, *The Book of Certainty* (the Sufi Doctrines of Faith, Vision and Gnosis), *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, *The Secret of Shakespeare*, *What is Sufism?*, the splendidly illustrated *Summits of Islamic Calligraphy and Illumination*, *Collected Poems*, and *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, *Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi* which has been translated into Arabic, French, Persian and Urdu. His *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, first published in 1983 has been internationally acclaimed as a masterpiece. He is also the author of several articles for the new *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, of the article on Sufism in the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the chapter on *Sufism* in the Cambridge University publication *Religion in the Middle East*, of the chapter on Sufi poetry in volume 2 of the *New Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* and numerous articles for *Studies in Comparative Religion* and *The Islamic Quarterly*.

## PUBLICATIONS

### ***Muhammad— his Life Based on the Earliest Sources***

Before the appearance of this book, Western languages lacked almost entirely a comprehensive and authentic account of the life and the Prophet

Muhammad. Now, Lings, has produced a superb narrative that, in its sobriety and dignity of style and its scrupulous and exhaustive fidelity to authentic and reliable sources, constitutes a major addition to Islamic literature in English.

### ***Religious Studies Review***

Martin Ling's *Life of Muhammad* is unlike any other. Based on Arabic sources of the eighth and ninth centuries, of which some important passages are translated here for the first time, it owes the freshness and directness of its approach to the words of the men and women who heard Muhammad speak and witnessed the events of his life.

Martin Lings has an unusual gift for narrative. He has adopted a style which is at once extremely readable and reflects both the simplicity and grandeur of the story. The result is something that can be read with equal enjoyment by those already familiar with Muhammad's life and those coming to it for the first time.

### ***A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century***

“Almost a prerequisite for any serious study of Sufism in European languages”: this was the verdict of Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his review of the first edition of this book (*A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*). According to the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, it is ‘one of the most thorough and intimately engaging books on Sufism to be produced by a Western scholar’. Certainly there is nothing second-hand about it. The author lets the Sufis speak for themselves and, in a series of unusual and absorbing texts mainly translated from the Arabic, he gives a vivid picture of life in a North African Sufi order. Against this background stands the unforgettable figure of the Algerian Shaykh who was head of the order from the death of his Master in 1909 until his own death in 1934. The last few chapters are mainly devoted to his writings, which include some remarkable mystic poems. For this second edition the author has added two well-documented chapters which throw new light on the teaching and personality of the Shaykh.

‘A masterly study of a man whose sanctity recalled the golden age of medieval mystics. In this well document book Dr Lings draws on many rare sources... and has made some important original contributions; in particular I know of no more lucid and convincing interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s much debated “pantheistic philosophy”’.

**A. J. Arberry**

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“Martin Lings lets above all the sources speak for themselves. But what he adds by way of commentary is of the greatest significance and may serve as a key to a deeper understanding of Islam as a whole’.

**Titus Burckhardt**

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‘A precious document not only for students of Islam but for all who are attracted to spiritual matters. Almost a prerequisite for any serious study of Sufism in European languages’.

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr**

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“One of the most thorough and intimately engaging books on Sufism produced by a Western scholar.”

**Journal of *New Eastern Studies***

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### ***What is Sufism?***

What do the Sufis believe? What do they aim at? What do they do? Unlike other writers on the subject, Martin Lings treats all three questions with equal justice. He is thus able to give a wealth of answers to the main question,

What is Sufism? Each answer being from a different angle but all going to the root of the matter. Here are two examples.

*‘Nearly 1000 years ago a great Sufi defined Sufism as “taste”, because its aim and its end could be summed up as direct knowledge of transcendent truths, such knowledge being, insofar as its directness is concerned, more comparable to the experience of the senses than to mental knowledge.*

*‘Most Western readers of this book will have heard quite early in life that “the Kingdom of Heaven is within you”. They will also have heard: “Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you”. But how many of them have ever received any instruction in the way of seeking or in the art of knocking? And even as these last four words were being written down, it came to mind that they are, in this given context, an answer to the very question put by our title’.*

What is Sufism? not only fills the need for a clear and reliable introduction to Sufism, but it is also unique in its thoroughness, and authoritative.

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Martin Lings knows his subject thoroughly and intimately and it has always been a characteristic of his writings that he goes straight to the heart of his subject. In his careful explanation of what Sufism is and, just as important, what it is not, he brings to bear both a profundity of understanding rare among modern writers, and also an uncompromising insistence on many aspects of Sufism which are usually brushed aside. The book plays a double role: it is both an excellent “introductory” work and a direct reflection of certain states from which a real answer might be given to the question? What is Sufism? Concise, illuminating and authoritative, it has the taste of *tasawwuf* to such an extent that to read it is like an anticipatory participation in the very subject matter itself.

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## ***The Book of Certainty***

“Our aim has been to express in the language of Sufism some of the universal truths which lie at the heart of all religions. Each chapter serves as a commentary upon some verse or verses of the Qur’an. The book is also based on various sayings of the Prophet, and to a certain extent upon a Qur’anic commentary attributed to Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi. As regards other influences, the reader will notice that many points of doctrine are introduced simply with the words “They say” or “It is said.” These words are to be taken quite literally for it must be remembered that Sufism is a living tradition and that a great part of Sufi teaching is unwritten and even anonymous. The same truths have been passed down from Master to disciple for generation after generation; and without the help of such oral teaching this book could never have been written.”

The publishers claim this volume to be “the first authentic modern account of Sufi teaching written “from within”. Every page bears out this claim, for the author is steeped in the esoteric teaching of the Sufi Shaykhs .... It is both enjoyable and instructive to peruse this little volume.

**Prof. A. J. Arberry**

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This book is an excellent introduction to Sufism, highly intelligent, balanced, lucid well written and in places really eloquent. It will stimulate advanced students of Sufism to fresh thinking. It is worth a careful perusal. Islamic Culture

**Hyderabad-Deccan**

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Abë Bakr Siraj ad-Din has bestowed upon the world a great benefaction in giving in this very important Sufi treatise, for belonging as it does to our own time, it is easier for us to assimilate than are the treatises and commentaries of the Sufis of old, and it may thus serve as a bridge between us and them.

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There are indeed few works known to the author of this review which, in so small a space and in a manner so vivid and so free from abstruseness, have been able to present the basic ideas required by one minded to engage in the spiritual course with full intent and not merely out of that passing interest which stops short at theory.

**Marco Pallis in *France-Asia***

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*The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*

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*Symbol and Archetype*

What is Symbolism? The answer to this question has been known to change altogether a man's life; and ignorance of it can reasonably be said to have produced all the gravest problems of our times. With reference to the great religions of the world, and in particular to Christianity and Islam, Martin Lings here gives us the answer in the clearest terms, with an unusually wide scope of illustration, a versatility to which the list of chapter headings bears some witness. At one point we are gripped by the universal message of four old Lithuanian songs which speak to us, in the language of symbols, from a remote antiquity; at another we are with the Queen of Sheba at her deeply symbolic meeting with Solomon, as recounted in the Qur'an. The central theme is man, stripped of his subhuman excrescences and re-endowed with his infinitely precious primordial heritage and the reader is quickly impelled to identify himself with that centre. Nor is it only his intelligence that impels him, for the further we read, the more we renew our deeply ingrained consciousness that everything— numbers, elements, senses, colours etc.— has a vertical dimension that gives it a divine significance; and this awareness brings with it an existential sense of that dimension in ourselves.

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### *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*

This book strikes at the root of almost every thing that makes it difficult for the present-day European to believe whole-heartedly in religion, and in doing so it shows modern man to be, in his own peculiar twentieth-century way, the embodiment of superstition in its most dangerous form. "We are faced in the modern world with a situation similar to that in the fable of the Emperor's new clothes. What is necessary more than anything else is simply that someone should speak the truth; and that is precisely what this book does."

### *Studies in Comparative Religion*

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The author argues in this book that man's diminished faith in religion is further undermined by his attempt to accommodate religion to his modern outlook. He believes that faith can only be restored by dispelling this illusion which prevents man's intelligence from seeing religion as it really is. Modern man is just as superstitious, in a twentieth century way, as more primitive individuals. Modern superstitions are also more virulent and dangerous than earlier ones. Martin Lings centres his interest on the Christian faith, but he also draws upon his wide knowledge of many other religions. *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* is a powerful, simple and readable defence of religion.

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### *The Eleventh Hour*

Martin Lings give us from the outset powerful reasons for believing that we have no reached a point in time from which 'the end'— what ever that may mean —is already in sight without being immediately imminent. In other words, we are now at an hour, which is neither the tenth nor the twelfth. He reminds us however that according to the most ancient traditions the 'twelfth hour' will mark the conclusion, not of time as a whole, but of one of the

great cycles of four ages, which will be followed by another such cycle; and he argues that what Judaism, Christianity and Islam call ‘the end of the world’ can be understood in the same non-absolute way, for the concept of the Millennium, which is clearly the equivalent of the new Golden Age of the next cycle of time, is to be found in all these monotheistic religions, bringing them into line, in this respect, with Hinduism, Greco-Roman Antiquity, and Buddhism. Within this framework, he analyses first of all the negative aspects of the modern world, then its positive aspects, showing it to be, all things considered, far worse and yet far better than is generally supposed. The future is touched on no more than briefly, but our attention is drawn to a considerable weight of prophetic evidence that we are on the brink of a world-wide devastation, not total, but none the less of cataclysmic proportions, and not final because it is to be ‘before the end’. But despite these ‘days of destruction’, after which a brief positive aftermath is also predicted, and despite some of the appalling evils of the present which are brought home to us here as perhaps never before, we think that most readers of this book will conclude that the advantages of being alive at this crucial moment of human history outweigh the disadvantages.

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### *The Secret of Shakespeare*

“Refreshing and invigorating...it should be on every bookshelf of real lovers of the real Bard.

**Sir Donald Wofit**

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“This short book says more to reveal or suggest what in Shakespeare is the quintessence of his greatness than the most laborious exposition could ever do.”

**Kathleen Raine**