

Eternal Wisdom in an Age of Illusion: Reflections Upon a Pathway

A paper prepared by David Cadman for the Annual Bahai'i Lecture
Maryland, USA
2nd April 2003

Introduction

It is a very great privilege for me to speak to you this evening in this Annual Bahai'i Lecture. It is also something of a surprise since I doubt whether there is anything very much that I could say that is not already known on this fine Maryland campus. Nevertheless, since your distinguished and beloved professor, Suheil Bushrui, is my brother in spirit, his was an invitation that I could not refuse. And so you have me here rather anxiously wondering how it is that I shall introduce you to my subject – *Eternal Wisdom in an Age of Illusion: Reflections Upon a Pathway*.

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In the Temenos lecture that he gave in London last year to launch his splendid book *The Wisdom of the Arabs*,¹ Professor Bushrui talked about the *philosophia perennis*, that ancient and eternal wisdom that lies at the root of all of the great spiritual traditions. In particular, he referred to the work of one of my heroes, Aldous Huxley, who, in 1946, published his own collection of sacred texts under the title of *The Perennial Philosophy*.² After that talk, Professor Bushrui and I discussed the scope and nature of this eternal wisdom, recognising how much it had to say to us, and how it might provide a necessary guide or pathway for the twenty-first century. This evening, I would like to continue that brotherly discussion and explore with you whether there is, indeed, a pathway that can lead us out of what I believe to be an 'age of illusion'.

Huxley described the perennial philosophy in terms of a "divine Reality" of which we are inextricably a part³. In this, there was nothing unusual for he was, after all, restating the teaching of many others. But then, with an insight that caused him to be criticised by those who valued the head above the heart, Huxley went on to say:

But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly or immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit. Why should this be so? We do not know. It is just one of those facts which we have to accept, whether we like them or not and however implausible and unlikely they may seem.⁴

¹ Suheil Bushrui, *The Wisdom of the Arabs*, One World, Oxford, 2002

² Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1946. Gottfried Leibniz is thought to have first coined the phrase *philosophia perennis* some three hundred years ago and many other writers, not least traditionalists such as René Guénon, Fithjof Schuon and K. A. Coomaraswamy, have also spoken of these eternal truths. Both Guénon and Coomaraswamy are referred to by Huxley.

³ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid, p.p. 2-3.

In a world that is marked so much by arrogance, hatred and violence, this emphasis upon humility and compassion may now be of especial importance, and so it is that this evening I would like to explore two aspects of Huxley's description of the perennial philosophy:

- Given my presumption that we live in an age of illusion, the first responds to Huxley's notion of a "divine Reality" and explores what it is that we take to be real and the consequences that flow from this. It is concerned with our 'language' of and for 'reality'. I want to suggest that this matter of 'language' may have direct relevance to the ways in which we tackle some of the principal problems that face mankind in the twenty-first century; not least, post Johannesburg 2002, those concerned with what we now refer to as 'sustainability' – social, economic and environmental sustainability. Indeed, I would like to suggest that it is possible that we may not be able to resolve these problems other than by challenging the 'language' of convention.
- And secondly, in response to Huxley's condition of making ourselves "loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit", I want to suggest that in finding another 'language' and in seeking and following a new path, what are needed are qualities and practices that are now quite rare. For, it seems to me, that the *philosophia perennis* is not doctrine but Truth. As such, it can be discovered in different ways, and whilst it can be discovered by intellect or, indeed, by good work, it can also be discovered by compassion.

More of this later but let me start with the question of 'language'. How do we define 'reality' and where do such definitions take us?

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Language is important because it gives shape to our thoughts and therefore to our actions and thus to their consequences. You may recall that the Buddhist *Dhammapada* opens with this verse:

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.⁵

And again, in another translation:

⁵ I came across this version in a book on someone else's bookshelf and did not make a note of the source.

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.⁶

If then, we wish to understand ‘reality’, understand who we are and how it is that we have come to be as we are, we have, it seems to me, to look not so much at our technological competence, our forms of government or, indeed, the state of our economy, but at *that which we hold to be true*. When all else is stripped away, what is it that defines who it is that we are; and, most importantly, what is it that governs our way of being? For “with our thoughts we make the world”, “our life is the creation of our mind”.

I suppose it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that we enter the twenty-first century in the guise of Economic Man, *Homo Economicus*. That is to say that the characteristics that are most commonly used to define (perhaps I should say quantify) the nature of our reality are the characteristics of measurement and in particular the characteristics of costs and revenues. What we have become is a function of this most particular ‘language’.⁷

This language, the language that has come to shape our world, has, perhaps, two main characteristics. Firstly, it is *reductionistic*, which is to say that it is a language of parts and not of wholes. It is a language that encourages us to see ourselves as ‘separate from’ rather than ‘a part of’. In this sense it is a partial and not a holy language. And, secondly, it is overwhelmingly a language of *economics, accounting and finance*, which is to say that it is a language of prices. It supposes that those things that are real, and of real value, are only those that can be measured by price. By contrast, it implies that those things that are not readily priced are in some sense unreal and/or of no real value, as though our whole lives could be measured in the columns of profit and loss and all that we value captured in a balance sheet.

This language is based upon the proposition that what is expressed as ‘the *real* world’ is confined to that which is tangible, concrete and fixed. Furthermore, it is not only confined to those things that can be measured, but also, most especially, to those things that can be possessed and

⁶ *The Dhammapada*, Translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin Books, England, 1973, p. 35.

⁷ The following two paragraphs are largely taken from: David Cadman, ‘With our thoughts we make the world’, *A Sacred Trust*, The Temenos Academy and The Prince’s Foundation, 2002p.p. 163-4.

consumed. And the real dilemma is that this language, useful and productive in its own way but nevertheless limited in its relevance, has come to be taken as having universal application. It is applied not simply to some kinds of science and to some kinds of market transaction but to all that we do. It has come to define and limit our experience. It is everywhere and governs all. It has brought us to where we are, and if we would rather be somewhere else we had best find a new language!

By contrast, the language of the perennial philosophy offers us a different reality, a divine Reality. Here, we cannot define ourselves entirely by reference to the material world since that would be to define us in terms of a part and not a whole. To be whole we have to be at one with that which is both within and yet beyond the material world. At the same time, since all is of one, we cannot separate ourselves entirely from all that is. Rather we have to practise to become *at one with another* – and this means not only all of mankind but also all beings, all fauna and flora, the mountains and the oceans, the clouds and the winds and the rains.

You will see that in beginning to explore another language we have already begun to enter a new realm, perhaps moving away from the prosaic to the poetic, from the mundane to the Divine. In support of this, let me quote from some texts. In this I seek not to persuade you by reason alone – for we share this path not only with those that journey with their head but also, and most especially, with those that journey with their heart. I invite you to sense whether what is said *feels* to be true. Do you, in truth, feel yourself to be no more than an entry on a balance sheet, a statistic in the calculation of national economic growth or do these ancient and timeless voices touch something else in you that you recognise as being true and of real worth?

Firstly, as an illustration of a way of being in which we are ‘at one’, here are two quotations from Huxley’s *Perennial Philosophy*. Both are from the medieval monk Meister Eckhart:

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.⁸

There is a spirit in the soul, untouched by time and flesh, flowing from the Spirit, remaining in the Spirit, itself wholly spiritual. In this principle is God, ever verdant, ever

⁸ Op cit, Huxley, 1972 edition, p.19.

flowering, in all the joy and glory of His actual Self.
 Sometimes I have called this principle the Tabernacle of the
 soul, sometimes a spiritual Light, anon I say it is a Spark.
 But now I say that it is more exalted above the earth. So I
 name it in a nobler fashion... It is free of all names and void
 of all forms. It is one and simple, as God is one and simple,
 and no man can in any wise behold it.⁹

And then here are two more, this time taken from Professor Bushrui's
Wisdom of the Arabs. Again they speak of our oneness with the Divine.
 Both are from one of the earliest Sufi masters Al-Hallaj:

Thou art my life and the innermost secret of my heart;
 Wherever I am, there also art thou....¹⁰

I am He whom I love and He whom I love is I;
 We are two souls dwelling in one body.
 When you look at me you can see Him,
 And you can see us both when you look at Him.¹¹

Surely, this makes us *feel* different, lifts us to another and nobler plane.
 Surely, it enables us to see more clearly, see how it is that what we take
 ourselves to be comes to define who we are and what we do.

If we really do take ourselves to be defined as *Homo Economicus*, then
 the rules of the market place and the balance of accounts set the
 parameters of reason and of being. All is subservient to the algebra of
 pricing. In the end, quite literally, it is the economy that counts. If, on the
 other hand, perhaps in some mysterious way that we cannot explain, we
 see ourselves as an expression of that which is Divine, then reverence for
 others now present and yet to come must cause us to temper our own
 desires with those qualities that are the teaching of all the great spiritual
 traditions – generosity, patience, simplicity, humility, harmlessness,
 compassion and so on, the very qualities that Huxley thought were
 necessary for those that would be able to understand and to practise the
 perennial philosophy, those that are “loving, pure in heart, and poor in
 spirit”.

It seems to me, then, that it is beyond doubt that the choice that we make
 about this matter of ‘language’ and ‘reality’ will lead us in different

⁹ Ibid, p.p. 22-23.

¹⁰ Op cit, Bushrui, p. 29.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 31.

directions. The first, the language of convention, will continue to promote its own fantasy, promising ever-increasing consumption for all, and thereby reinforcing the environmental and social catastrophes that have already begun to take place – not least flood, famine, pestilence, violence and economic and political migration – ever waiting for the technological and political ‘fix’ that will redeem all. There is, of course, a formidable risk in taking this path but, somewhat alarmingly, the experience of last year’s Johannesburg Summit suggests that it *is* the path that governments are set to follow.

Those of you who are familiar with Buddhist texts will know the prophetic story of the Wheel Turning King who failed to give to the poor. Poverty led to theft, theft to violence and so on and so on until at the lowest point, at the depth of degradation, just a few people had the insight and courage to turn away from this seemingly unstoppable tragedy and, once more, proclaim the ancient wisdom of generosity, simplicity and compassion until the well-being of all was restored.¹² Will there now, I wonder, be those that have the insight and courage to prick the bubble of our illusion and turn us away from such a calamity?

We must pray that this is so; otherwise we may conclude that those that profess calamity may be prophetic. As you will no doubt be aware, such prophecies are not unfamiliar in the sacred teachings of the great spiritual traditions. And, coming from a group of writers that professed the perennial philosophy at much the same time as Huxley,¹³ one such is contained in the work of René Guénon because, for him, the dilemma was not *in* but *of* the modern world. I am rather reluctant to quote Guénon, since he is quite dismissive of the Buddhism that I so much love. However, on the matter in question (and indeed on many other matters) he is particularly clear. In his book *The Crisis of the Modern World*, first published in 1942, he wrote as follows:

Will the modern world follow this fatal course right to the end, or will a new readjustment intervene once more...before it reaches the bottom of the abyss into which it is being drawn? ...since, according to all the indications furnished by the traditional doctrines, we have in fact entered upon the last phase of the *Kali-Yuga*, the darkest period of this ‘dark age, the state of dissolution from which it is impossible to emerge otherwise than by a cataclysm,

¹² Digha Nikaya Division III.26.

¹³ Including, for example, A. K. Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon – see footnote 2 above.

since it is not a mere readjustment that is necessary at such a stage, but a complete renovation.¹⁴

For Guénon, it is as if we may have to enter the dark and cold of Winter before the new shoots of another Spring can come to be. For, he says, “the passage from one cycle to another can take place only in darkness”.¹⁵

Despite this rather gloomy prognosis, it seems to me that the second path, the path of reverence and sufficiency, which is the path offered by the perennial philosophy, does at least provide us with the possibility of a more sustainable way – provided, of course, that we turn to it with resolve and without delay.

Time does not permit me to develop this as much as I should like to. But suffice it to say that it is my view that the doctrine of sufficiency and simplicity that is today often portrayed as no more than a comfortable alternative for those that already have enough will, in our children or our grandchildren’s time, become not an alternative but *a necessity for survival*. For, in a quite practical sense, it is beyond doubt that although our global trade professes the contrary, this planet cannot support *for all* the level of consumption presently enjoyed by *the few*. For example, we are told that if China were to reach the same level of consumption as the West, it would absorb in any one year the entire world fish catch, the entire U.S. grain harvest and well in excess of the entire world oil production.¹⁶ And yet such an aspiration not only exists but is being actively promoted both within China and amongst those countries who seek to trade with her – that means us.

It seems clear to me, therefore, that in time – and not too distant a time – we must challenge the conventional definition of reality, before it is too late abandoning the language of unbounded materialism and consumption and returning once more to the language and practice of the great spiritual traditions – the “divine Reality” of Huxley’s *Perennial Philosophy*.

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And so we come to the second matter, the question of how we can find our way towards such a path. Somewhat oddly, you might think, it seems

¹⁴ René Guénon, ‘The Dark Age’, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Sophia Perennis, Fourth revised edition, 2001, p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁶ Lester R. Brown, *Eco-Economy*, W.W.Norton & Company, New York and London, 2001.

to me that the *starting point* of such a journey is not political activism or even social conscience. Nor is it intellectual endeavour, the writing of papers and the giving of lectures – however important each of these may be on a splendid campus such as this! Rather, I suggest, it is the presently rare qualities of *slowness* matched with an *attentive and compassionate silence* which, together, lead us towards the Path of Love.

It may be difficult for us in the West and in the twenty first century to accept that slowness might add to our well-being and that silence and compassion might bring happiness. But that, of course, *is* the teaching of the sacred tradition of holiness – that to become whole, to be fully ourselves and at one with all that *is*, we have to ‘let go’ and learn to *dwell* in the Divine.

Such a dwelling requires a certain spontaneity and a vivacity of spirit, but above all else it also requires an uncommon capacity for slowness. Like many of us I suspect, for most of my life I have had an obsession with ‘doing’, seldom living in the present but always in some kind of anxious future. And it is only recently that I have come to see this as a Mighty Hindrance – although I have to admit, perhaps like some of you, that I still have great difficulty changing my way of being and putting this lesson into practice!

So far, I have quoted from unquestionably profound sources such as the *Dhammapada*, Meister Eckhart and Al-Hallaj. By contrast, you might think, some while ago I read the following extract from *The Curly Pyjama Letters*¹⁷ on the notice board at Schumacher College, in England:

Dear Vasco, in response to your question “What is worth doing and what is worth having?” I would like to say this. *It is worth doing nothing and having a rest*; in spite of all the difficulty it may cause, you must rest Vasco – otherwise you will become RESTLESS! I believe the world is sick with exhaustion and dying of restlessness.... Yours sleepily, Mr Curly

At once, I can hear the outraged voices of those who can see that there is much to be done and who, like me, carry the childhood burden of always having to have something to do. But on reflection, is not Mr. Curly right to point out that our restlessness and consequent fatigue are “ultimately soul destroying as well as earth destroying”?¹⁸

¹⁷ Michael Leunig, *The Curly Pyjama Letters*, Viking, 2001.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Buddha regarded Restlessness (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) as one of the Five Hindrances to Liberation. And, in my own Quaker tradition we are also urged to recognise the dangers of ‘busyness’. The following advice is taken from our *Quaker Faith and Practice*:

Every stage of our lives offers fresh opportunities.
Responding to divine guidance, try to discern the right time to undertake or relinquish responsibilities without undue pride or guilt. Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be great busyness.¹⁹

[Perhaps I should just make clear that I recognise that I may be giving the impression that I propose a way of inaction, of distancing oneself from the world and doing nothing. This is not so. Rather I am proposing that we distinguish more clearly between what we might call Distracted Action and True Action. The former is common and the latter rare. In his parable of the talents, Jesus makes it clear that we have a duty to use our talents in the service of the Lord.²⁰ And in the opening chapters of the *Gita* the lord Krishna instructs the prince Arjuna that he has no option but to be active. Indeed, he teaches him that each one of us has a vocation – a way of life that is the true expression of our nature – and that this vocation is inescapable and cannot be thrust aside. However, it is also made clear that this *svadharma* can only be realised with the discipline, love and understanding that flow from a pure mind and a pure heart. It is in this way, and only in this way, that our *karma* is transformed into True Action.]²¹

So there is slowness... And then there is silence.

As of course you know, the great spiritual traditions have always understood the need for attentive silence, for the regular practise of meditation and contemplation. For such practice is regarded as the very foundation of true action. Indeed, as the late Greek Orthodox writer Philip Sherrard has made clear,²² silent contemplation is the foundation upon which all else stands. Suggesting that true knowledge requires us to become one with the Divine, Sherrard proposes that this must be through the practice of contemplation:

¹⁹ *Quaker Faith and Practice*, Second Edition, 1999, A&Q 28.

²⁰ Matthew 25 14-30.

²¹ See *The Bhagavad Gita*, Penguin Classics, 1962, translation by Juan Mascaró, especially chapters 2-5; and Vinoba, *Talks on the Gita*, published by Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 14th edition, November 2000, especially chapters 2-5.

²² Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, T&T Clark, 1998.

...for contemplation is essentially the action through which we are led to a knowledge of our true identity and being and hence the true identity and being of other things as well... It is not (then) that contemplation is opposed to action: not only is it in itself a form – the highest form – of action, but also unless all other actions are informed by the knowledge that it embraces they will be performed in ignorance... To act well, we must first know. Thus, while contemplation and action are complementary, they are not on an equal footing: contemplation must precede action.²³

And for those of you that have had the privilege of living, even for a short while, with those that most patently lead a holy life, it will be clear that the distinction between contemplation and action is a false one. Indeed, by contrast, it seems to me that it is *our* thoughtless and compulsive urge to ‘do’ that so often leads to harm.

Once again, I find myself drawn to Guénon. For, criticising the modern world as being obsessed with action, he sets out the case for contemplation having “the right to predominance”,²⁴ like Sherrard, claiming that contemplation and true knowledge are either synonymous or, at least complementary. For, he says, the principle “from which [action] draws all the reality it is capable of possessing...can be found only in contemplation, or, if one will, in knowledge”.²⁵

Huxley’s *Perennial Philosophy* also has something to say about this attentive contemplation, the still and clear tranquillity of meditation. Indeed, there is a chapter in his book that is entitled ‘Silence’ in which, to my own embarrassment for this evening, I note the following quotation from Lao Tzu:

He who knows does not speak;
He who speaks does not know.²⁶

So there we have it – slowness, stillness, silence and attentiveness. How different all of this seems from the unending noise, pace and distraction of today. In this, I note with some amusement that writing in 1945 Huxley says:

²³ Ibid, p.p. 246-7.

²⁴ Iop cit, Guénon, p. 34.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 247.

The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and the noise of desire – we hold history’s record for all of them. And no wonder; for all the resources of our almost miraculous technology have been thrown into the current assault against silence. That most popular and influential of all recent inventions, the radio, is nothing but a conduit through which pre-fabricated din can flow into our homes.²⁷

One wonders what he would have said today with television, portable stereos and mobile phones, not to mention the constant noise of traffic nearby and distant.

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In coming to an end of these ramblings, these ‘reflections upon a pathway’, I would like to retrace my steps a little and, for a moment more, explore one final part of the journey. So far, we have been in the company of the *philosophia perennis*, Huxley’s ‘perennial philosophy’. But, on reflection, and particularly for our time, I feel myself drawn towards another phrase, not the *philosophia perennis* but the *sophia eternis* the ‘eternal wisdom’. For whereas I think that, for us, *philosophy* now speaks perhaps of the head, *wisdom* carries with it the promptings of the heart. It seems to me to be not only an altogether more ancient and well-grounded word²⁸ but also one that leads us more clearly towards divine Love.

I note that, in the title of his book, *The Wisdom of the Arabs*, Professor Bushrui has chosen the word ‘wisdom’ and not ‘philosophy’, perhaps because he finds that at heart these were and are, as he puts it, “a poetic people”.²⁹ In Buddhism we know that wisdom and compassion are considered to be two parts of one whole and in my Quaker tradition we are advised to “take heed...to the promptings of love and truth in [our] hearts”³⁰ – love *and* truth, wisdom *and* compassion.

‘Philosophy’ does, of course mean the ‘love of wisdom’. And is it, do you think, Sophia, the goddess of wisdom, who leads us along this pathway of Love, the understanding that Love *is*, which is to say that Love is of the

²⁷ Op cit, Huxley, p.p. 249-250.

²⁸ On this, see Rene Guenon, ‘The Dark Age’, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Sophia Perennis, Fourth revised edition, 2001, p.12 et seq.

²⁹ Op cit, Bushrui, p. xi.

³⁰ Op cit, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, Advice 1.02.1.

essence of being? I think so, and I feel that if we wish to find the Truth we need to follow *this* path, for Love is both the pathway and that to which the path will lead us. It is the Quest and the Grail.

And, as it happens, it is also the path that leads me back to your beloved professor – for it is this matter, the matter of Love, which was the theme of my contribution to his *Felicitation*. In a paper written in the form of a letter and entitled *The Honeysuckle and the Rose*³¹, I said the following:

It seems to me, then, dear Suheil, that each of these doctrines, separately and together, tell us that Love is the ground of reality, the still point of being; that this reality is to be found in contemplation and meditation; that such reflection is the *necessary foundation* of true action and that, this being so, we need profoundly to change our perspective, our way of being; ...[Indeed,] we need to find a new ‘language,’ to move away from an ethos of separation, conflict and competition towards one of wholeness, co-operation and compassion.

...All language, especially all naming and numbering and the work of the rational mind, is a struggling attempt to regain that which has been lost. And that which has been lost is a sense of one-ness, of being at one with, of Being in (within) Love. But now, my friend, I understand that we do not need to name our paths or even try to describe them. We need to walk along them, shuffle about and sit by the roadside, meeting companions, sharing food and stories, as you and I have done. Naming them is just words. In the end there are no words, for as we have seen Love is beyond anything that we can say. Indeed, the irony is that in the end, in an age that is full of noise and distraction, we come once again to Stillness and Silence, the dwelling place of the Divine.

And so, to conclude, in our quest let us not underestimate the power of Love, for when the heart has Love within it, it has an invisible communication with God and a heart filled with Love can influence its own environment in a way that is felt but not known.³² I come to an end, therefore, with this quotation from one of the earliest Quakers, William

³¹ For further thoughts on this see my essay ‘The Honeysuckle and the Rose’ included in *For the Word, the Spirit and the World: Essays in Honor of Suheil Bushrui*, forthcoming 2003. Editors M. Dravis and M. Masoudi.

³² I am grateful to the monk Arsenios of the monastery of Vatopaidi, Mount Athos for this insight.

Penn, who, speaking in 1693 but with words that are as relevant today as they were then, said this:

A good cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil, that good may come of it... We are too ready to retaliate, rather than forgive, or gain by love and information. And yet we could hurt no man that we believe loves us. Let us then try what Love will do: for if men did once see we love them, we should soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but Love gains: and he that forgives first, wins the laurel.³³

And so, my friends, if we needs must find a new pathway, learn to walk more slowly and be more attentive, “Let us...try what Love will do”.

OM Shanti my dear Suheil!

³³ William Penn, *Some fruits of solitude*, 1693, maxims 537, 540, 543-546. Quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 24.03.