

Book Review

Review of “The Essential Whitall Perry” by Harry Oldmeadow

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Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) deserves wider recognition given the profundity of his insights, and the discernment he displays with respect to humanity’s great wisdom traditions. The editor of this volume has referred to him as “[t]he most authoritative traditionalist of American background” (Oldmeadow, 2000, p. 48). Readers may have encountered Perry’s work through *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (1971)—a monumental compilation of spiritual texts from all the world’s religions. It is worth citing the following passage taken from the introduction to this landmark publication, in which he invites the reader to “enter upon a spiritual journey”:

In this book he will encounter the heritage he shares in common with all humanity, in what is essentially timeless and enduring and pertinent to his final ends. Out of this myriad mosaic of material emerges a pattern of the human personality in the cosmos that is unerringly consistent, clear, and struck through with a resonance infallible in its ever renewed reverberations of the one same Reality (Perry, 1971, p. 19).

Perry was an American author born in Belmont, Massachusetts, to a prominent Boston Quaker family. He developed an interest in Platonism and Vedanta in his youth, studied at Harvard University, and traveled extensively. Throughout his life, he maintained associations with authorities in Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Native American circles. He was one of the very few people who was personally acquainted with all four of the leading figures of the perennialist (or traditionalist) school: René Guénon (1886–1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) (the two originators), along with Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) (the two continuators).

His commitment to the traditional philosophies of the East and West led to a meeting with Coomaraswamy in 1946, who introduced him to the perennial philosophy and the writings of Guénon and Schuon. Between 1946 and 1952, he and his wife (Barbara) relocated to Cairo in order to be close to Guénon until his passing, and then moved to Lausanne in Switzerland to live near Schuon, with whom he was already associated, prior to returning to the United States in 1980. In the perspective of the perennial philosophy

there is one Truth concealed behind all valid spiritual forms—an “uncolored light” that refracts through a single prism that gives rise to all colors—an important recurring motif throughout Perry’s work. His articles on metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual counterfeits were published in a variety of journals, notably *Studies in Comparative Religion*. He is the author of *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition* (1978), *The Widening Breach* (1995), and *Challenges to a Secular Society* (1996).

This volume of Perry’s essential writings includes a broad sample of his articles, including letters and other previously unpublished material. It is divided into *Part 1: The Life and Work of Whitall Perry* and *Part 2: A Selection of Writings*. The latter section is more extensive and includes a wide array of essays on topics such as Tradition, Metaphysics, Cosmology, Psychology, and Pseudo-Spirituality.

We commence this review with a key point that Perry makes in an interview conducted in May 1996, in which he refers to

...the primordial state of man when he was in the terrestrial Paradise, with the inward and the outward world united in his soul. There was no schism between the inward and the outward—the subject and the object. After the Fall, the subject became separated from the object, so to speak, and the object has always been moving farther and farther toward the periphery, with man chasing after it and losing sight of the center and the inward self. Therefore one could say that profane knowledge is the pursuit of the outward world, with a consequent loss of the knowledge and understanding of the inward world (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 3).

The loss of any sense of the sacred makes it imperative for human beings to rediscover it through an attachment to one of the divinely revealed traditions. In doing so, the doorway is opened to proper discrimination and self-knowledge. This requires a “descent into hell” to bring to light the hidden things in the human soul that impede integral knowledge, and the need to put things in their rightful place, so as to restore awareness of our spiritual center which has been eclipsed. Without the aid of sacred tradition, this inner unfolding is scarcely even possible. Perry explains that “The door to self-knowledge is closed by the fact the person can’t—or, rather, won’t—see the thing that he has to see” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 11).

It is by wayfaring on a divinely revealed path that we come to see what our true vocation is in this life. He writes: “The spiritual man is one who perceives the sacred in everything; he is aware of the vertical ray that attaches each created thing to the Creator” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 13). It is essential here to understand what Tradition is and what it is not. Perry states that “Tradition has its origin in Religion... Religion is Revelation from God to man, with Tradition being its application and full extension in every domain” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 25). He goes on to illustrate how this perspective differs markedly from the outlook of modernity:

Tradition is the continuity of Revelation: an uninterrupted transmission, through innumerable generations, of the spiritual and cosmological principles, sciences, and laws resulting from a revealed religion: nothing is neglected, from the establishment of social orders and codes of conduct to the canons regulating the arts and architecture, ornamentation and dress; it includes the mathematical, physical, medical, and psychological sciences, encompassing moreover those deriving from celestial movements. (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 37).

By means of a metaphysical framework, harmony is established between the outward (exoteric) and inward (esoteric) forms of religion, and light is shed on the meaning of human diversity in relation to other facets of human life. Perry elaborates as follows:

There is a common origin and basic Unity underlying all the great traditions on earth, and as one begins to appreciate this, one begins to appreciate the *raison d'être* for their differences in outward forms, mercifully given by God in His wisdom to suit the varying needs of particular races, temperaments, times and places (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 305).

It is important to see that the West's burgeoning secularization began with the Renaissance and the birth of humanism. To properly understand such a phenomenon requires a reappraisal of this movement—along with the Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment—all of which are too often celebrated as the most significant achievements in the formation of the modern mindset, whereas these developments have proved to be, in fact, quite pernicious to the spiritual wellbeing of humanity.

Perry also points out essential differences between traditional “sciences of the soul” in contrast to the anomalies found in modern Western psychology. Sacred psychology is rooted in a wisdom founded on metaphysical and cosmological principles, unlike the profane sciences which are limited to a purely empirical or “horizontal” perspective: “[P]sychology has been developed with multiple proficiencies for dealing with symptoms; what is missing is a discipline to deal with the causes” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 94).

The inner void created in people by the ravages of an aggressive secularism has greatly contributed to the mental health crisis that plagues humanity today. Perry observes that “The loss of religion as Center in the world has left a hole which psychology is trying to fill” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 94). The harm caused by modern psychology stems from its annexation of the psyche's connection to the Divine (Schuon, 1966). Every sacred psychology is able to discern between psychic and spiritual realities, recognizing that the empirical ego cannot contribute to healing our psychic maladies as it needs recourse to a reality beyond itself that is not similarly infirm.

The spiritual path aims to unify the subject and object (or the inner and outer domains), which requires restoration of the transpersonal Intellect or the “Eye of the Heart.” Perry points out that “In the world of pairs, this Reality is necessarily invisible to our pair of eyes, but it can be seen with the single vision of the Eye of the Heart” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, pp. 166–167). Due to the degradation of this transcendent faculty, we have lost sight of our sacred center. Perry summarizes the gravity of this situation: “Having lost contact with the Source of its own inwardness—the Primordial State—the subjective pole gravitates towards the outward dimension and seeks its paradise in the bewildering panoply of phenomenalism—from the frivolous to the frankly sinister” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 184). The inevitable result is the obscuration of the human soul in a *cul-de-sac* of darkness: “Modern man, having virtually lost all concept of the Absolute, was henceforth passively letting himself be progressively locked into an ‘absolute’ relativity from both sides” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 187).

Perry also addresses the topical theme of psychedelics and their limitations, especially when seen as a substitute for traditional methods that fortify our spiritual

condition. He writes: “Nothing could be more erroneous than the belief that the magical operation of some external power on the psychic faculties could in itself effect a real and lasting transmutation of soul, especially apart from all question of suitability and preparation of the vehicle involved” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 210). The traditional use of entheogens for healing and ceremonial purposes is always accompanied by careful “preparation and ... ritual guidance” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 210). These substances “have served universally as supports adjacent to ritual practices” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 218), even though the safeguards that are essential to their proper use are rarely observed today.

The conformation of the ego to its transcendent source is essential, but the ego cannot surpass its own limits. “For the self or ego exists by definition as a result of ignorance, and ignorance cannot overcome ignorance” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 267). The empirical ego is a complex phenomenon that contemporary psychotherapy and mental health services have failed to grasp: “The ego is a Hydra-headed monster sprouting two heads for each cut off, and it is [authentic] ritual alone that can cauterize the wound and prevent new growth, and at the same time nourish the soul with the legitimate food proper to its spiritual formation. Ritual is God’s way, as opposed to man’s way” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 268). What is urgently required now is adherence to an authentic religious tradition, with its sacred rites, in order to deliver the spiritual seeker beyond the confines of their cramped ego, for we cannot accomplish this by our efforts alone.

The sacrament of the present moment is the doorway to discovering our True Self or primordial nature: “The possibility of full realization, even here and now, since it cannot be other than in the Here and the Now, is affirmed by all traditions” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 272). Through tradition, we are able to abide in the “eternal now” which is to realize who we truly are: “The great imponderable in all spiritual work is: how to be what one is, and how to cease being what one is not” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 276). Time and time again, Perry emphasizes that “The aim of a spiritual path is to restore the soul to its primordial nature” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 302).

The Essential Whitall Perry is a timely and relevant contribution to understanding humanity’s common problems, and to tackling the manifold crises that afflict humanity today. It is clear that all knowledge, including modern science, presupposes a point of view. Science is not neutral; it is built on its own set of assumptions and methods of verification. It is worth recalling that “science” comes from the Latin word *scientia*, which literally means “knowledge.” Modern science and psychology have asserted monopolies for themselves—not only in the West but across the world. For this reason, scientific ideas are not generated in a social or temporal vacuum; they are value-laden. Perhaps the most pressing question pertains to how modern science and psychology (and mental health) can be restored to their sacred ontologies and epistemologies, but in a manner that is informed by the diverse cultures of the world and their spiritual traditions. How this will occur is a paramount concern in the discernment of consciousness and entheogenic studies, in accordance with the sacred psychologies of the plenary traditions.

Few writers illuminate the perils of our human condition with such clarity, which is achieved not only through “thinking” but in living timeless teachings that are neither of the East nor West, regardless of what divinely revealed forms they may assume. In adhering to one tradition, we simultaneously engage with all of them. Although the perennial philosophy has come under increasing criticism in recent years, interest in its insights nonetheless continues. Its detractors are arguably insensitive to its nuanced understanding of religious phenomena, insofar as they fail to recognize their own prejudices in considering perennialist claims impartially. Most importantly, they do not

offer alternatives for how we are to understand human and religious pluralism in an era where this is indispensable. Until they are able to do so, there is very little that such critiques can offer in affording authentic guidance on these matters. We conclude with a powerful reminder as to why living our lives by traditional spiritual principles, while repellent to today’s secular mores, is the greatest form of resistance to the all-consuming malaise of our times: “[W]e live in abnormal times which require ‘abnormal’ responses” (quoted in Oldmeadow, 2024, p. 305).

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