



Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism

By William Stoddart, Edited by Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz

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“The only antidote to the relative and the subjective is the absolute and the objective, and it is precisely they that are the contents of traditional metaphysics or the *philosophia perennis*.” – William Stoddart

In his new book *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism* “perennialist” author William Stoddart synthesizes the vast depth and breadth of the traditionalist perspective that he discovered in 1945, at the age of 20, through the writings of the metaphysician Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, curator of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; a seminal spokesman of the “perennial philosophy” that led the author to the writings of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. Schuon later came to be his spiritual mentor. It might be of interest to the reader to note that Aldous Huxley who published his anthology, *The Perennial Philosophy** in 1945 became from that time forward the central figure attributed to the “perennial philosophy.” Yet the three writers mentioned above, who are relatively unknown outside certain circles, have dedicated their lives to its doctrinal exposition and living in accordance with its spiritual methods. Readers who have never encountered their writings will be very surprised to see that what they presumed the “perennial philosophy” to be, from both a theoretical and practical outlook, is quite the contrary.

Dr. Stoddart makes the traditional perspective accessible to those who have never been exposed to the “perennial philosophy” providing an excellent introduction and topographic in scope, and yet his book offers countless pointers for those who are more familiar or established in the traditional perspective. He conveys this perspective, as

* “One comment, concerning Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*: the least one can say is that his comments are not at the same high level of the quotes he selected. His approach is more “literary” than really spiritual.” Mateus Soares de Azevedo, also the editor of *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*.

Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism

disclosed in the preface of the book, with three key characteristics: “precision, simplicity, and essentiality” as he coherently outlines what has been lost and forgotten in the modern and postmodern worlds, preceding to the essence of theory (doctrine) and then practice (method), which are all indispensable in understanding the “perennial philosophy.”

The book is divided into a triadic discourse, the first part is: *Forgetting DECLINE or what we have forgotten*. It is in these seven chapters where Dr. Stoddart contrasts the traditional world to that of the modern and postmodern decisively underscoring the “progress” that has led to our current impasse—shedding light on the terminal polarity of our times—survival or destruction? He points out the “shadow” or “unconscious” implications of evolutionism, progressivism, scientism, psychologism and democracy itself as the pseudo-religion of contemporary man, which is rarely perceived, understood or questioned in the current era. In chapter four: *Ideological Obstacles to the Spiritual Life* Dr. Stoddart makes it clear that the “evils” committed in the name of religion (i.e. terrorism and that of fundamentalism in whatever shape or form) should not be confused nor identified with true religion itself. In chapter five: *Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School* he explains how the increase of “atheism” in the modern and postmodern eras have led to further disarray of the Western World. He clarifies that the universal principles of the “perennial philosophy” are not “syncretism”, but rather a synthesis—testifying that all religions are one in the transcendent Unity. This does not however mean that one must discard religion altogether thinking that because they are all one, *ipso facto* it being unnecessary to practice a religion. This has also been one of the many unfortunate misunderstandings of those who have interpreted Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* to be almost anything that the human imagination could derive from its own directives. Including the idea that it is somehow enough to acknowledge the transcendent Unity — the “perennial philosophy” — without practicing a specific and genuine spiritual form. Dr. Stoddart clarifies—that one must practice a religious form if one is to align oneself with the “perennial philosophy.” It is through the metaphysical principles of the “perennial philosophy” that a true universal understanding of diverse ethnicities and races (i.e. many of the popularized terms of our current era such as “cultural competencies”, “cultural diversity” and “multiculturalism”) can be established. It is for this reason that Dr. Stoddart points out that the “perennial philosophy” is not “syncretism” but rather a synthesis—where each of the traditions remains integrally its own, each one affirming, beyond its relative distinctions and differences, the primacy of truth. What is of the human or individual (relative) order and at the same time Universal (Absolute) order—or what is of immanence and transcendence. It is here that the voice and outlook of the “traditionalists” can offer guidance in resolving the conflict and violence that plagues our current epoch by testifying to the validity of all revelations that were disclosed to the different ethnicities and races of the world, without creating a monopoly on truth or speaking of “oneness” without any substance behind the words which is sadly enough often the case.

Part two of the book is entitled: *Remembering (theory) TRUTH or what we have to know* is composed of six chapters. In chapter eight he examines what religion is according to the “perennial philosophy.” In chapter nine he clarifies the misconceptions that are commonly attributed to the idea of “orthodoxy” which is similar to the first item of the Buddhist Eightfold Path “right view” or “right thinking” also connoting doctrinal purity. In chapter ten he identifies what is commonly misunderstood by the term “intellect” and

Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism

how, as it relates to the “perennial philosophy,” is synonymous with Spirit, seated in the heart and not the brain—having nothing to do with discursive thought or subjectivity. In chapter eleven he briefly outlines the “perennialist school” and the key figures who were involved: René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) and provides their biographical information. In chapter thirteen he describes what education is from a perennial perspective.

The final portion of the book, part three: *Remembering (practice) SPIRITUALITY or what we have to do*. He clarifies the many misconceptions of the term “mysticism” which has been marked by individualistic subjectivity. The author gives an overview of the different religious traditions, some from a first hand account, reading like a spiritual travel log—where he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain of Mount Athos, a remote monastic community where Christian spirituality has been practiced in its purity since the 5th century AD. The author also writes about receiving *darshan* (“divine sighting”) with the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894-1994) who traces his spiritual lineage to the original Ādi Śaṅkarācārya who is known for his metaphysical doctrine of *advaita* or “non-dualism”. There is also an appendix with excerpts of his previously unpublished letters including a brief biography of the author and a glossary of terms.

In each chapter of *Remembering in a World of Forgetting* Dr. Stoddart condenses potent kernels of traditional knowledge and wisdom without compromising these doctrines and methods and yet he imparts to the reader the essentials of what is needed to be known by any seeker of truth. Although this work is not devoted to any specific religious revelation, the author remains true to the ‘transcendent unity of religions’ by providing the metaphysical principles that underlie these traditions so that the reader may understand each *qua* their unique revelation and simultaneously in their universality. It is these metaphysical principles that will assist the seeker in the post-modern era beyond the psychological imbalance and spiritual confusion that has become a “norm” and in fact plagues the current epoch. This new work by Dr. Stoddart will provide an astute reference and contribution to other “perennialist” or “traditionalist” works as it offers *de facto* a grand synthesis of many ideas found in other “traditionalist” works and also contributes novel and insightful pointers that are not found in other “traditionalist” works. The only shortcoming if we could imagine one is that the work could have been longer in length but perhaps this tendency is also part of a larger systemic quandary that places *quantity* above quality. We will conclude this review with a few fitting words from the authors *Excerpts from Letters*: “Religion is a *form* of Truth (it is ‘colored’), and as such it is accessible to the whole community. The ‘*pure* Truth’ (‘uncolored’) is for the very few.”