

In Memoriam: William Stoddart (1925–2023)

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On the morning of November 9, 2023, William Stoddart returned to his Lord; he was ninety-eight years old. Stoddart was, without question, one of the most noteworthy representatives of the perennial philosophy in our times. He lived a full and remarkable life, traveling extensively to meet spiritual authorities and visit sacred sites around the world.

Stoddart's deep interest in all major religions led to extensive travels around the globe. In Europe, he sought to access the fullness of the Christian tradition—in Catholicism (France, Spain, Italy, Ireland, and Poland); Orthodoxy (Greece, Russia, and Serbia); and Protestantism (Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia). He also traveled elsewhere so as to immerse himself in Islam (Morocco, Turkey, and Bosnia), the Hindu tradition in India (where he had *darshan* with the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi), and the Buddhist worlds of Sri Lanka and Japan.

Stoddart spent his professional career in London, working chiefly in medical research until 1982. Following his retirement, he relocated to North America in order to live near his spiritual mentor, Frithjof Schuon, who had moved from Switzerland to the United States in 1980. As he never married or had children, one could say that his many spiritual friends and associates became a *de facto* family, with whom he journeyed towards the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Stoddart was born in Carstairs, Scotland, in 1925. He was raised and educated there until he attended the University of Glasgow, where he studied languages (French, German, and Spanish). He maintained his interest in languages and literature throughout his life. Stoddart also completed a medical degree at the University of Glasgow, followed by additional studies at the universities of Edinburgh and Dublin.

Raised a Protestant, the young Stoddart's focus was very much on the Bible, God, Christ, and prayer. He discovered Eastern spirituality through his father, who often traveled to India. He also learned about Hinduism and Islam during his school years. Having intuited, from an early age, the validity of all religions, he remarked: "It never for a moment entered my head that these religions could be false. I knew instinctively that they were true, but had no idea at the time just how much the doctrine of 'the transcendent unity of the religions' was going to mean for me in later life. I should add that this intuition of the validity of the non-Christian religions in no way weakened my attachment to Christianity."¹⁹

At the age of twenty, Stoddart discovered the writings of the great art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947). Encountering these works took his life in a completely different direction. It was through Coomaraswamy that he learned about the work of the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951). To understand the fullness of Stoddart's life and outlook, one needs to begin with the seminal exponents of what has become known as the Perennialist (or Traditionalist) school; specifically, Guénon, Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984). While he recognized that there were many other advocates of the *philosophia perennis*, Stoddart himself would assert that these were the most significant. He constantly reminded serious seekers that one needed to "read and re-read the writings of

¹⁹ Unpublished interview with Lynn Pollack (2003).

Frithjof Schuon” in particular. It was through doing so that one could recognize the supra-formal truth at the heart of all religions.

Stoddart was an award-winning author and editor. He was assistant editor of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, a British journal dedicated to publishing writings on the perennial philosophy. He was a board member in the early days of the Matheson Trust, which promotes the philosophical, metaphysical, cosmological, and aesthetic study of all traditions. One of Stoddart’s gifts was his capacity to distill complex and voluminous information into very direct and succinct language, for which reason he was regarded as a “master of synthesis.”²⁰

While he was exceptionally gifted in his exposition of the world’s religions and their inner dimensions, he also managed to make them accessible to ordinary people. He was always reminding seekers not to complicate or overthink matters, as one only had to focus on the essentials. Indeed, his motivation to simplify things was solely with a view to the “one thing needful” (Luke 10:42). It goes without saying, however, that his work remained a paragon of rigor and clarity.

In paying tribute to the life and work of the English Catholic writer Bernard Kelly (1907–1958), Stoddart recalls a telling statement about Kelly that could just as easily have applied to himself: “There are some of us who can’t rightly pray without a pen in our hands.”²¹

Stoddart upheld the need for people to be grounded in a way of life that allowed for the assimilation of truth and wisdom into their hearts and minds. Central to this endeavor was the indispensable

²⁰ Mateus Soares de Azevedo, “Book Review—Outline of Buddhism,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), p. 277.

²¹ Bernard Kelly, quoted in William Stoddart, “Scholastic Universalist: The Writings and Thought of Bernard Kelly (1907–1958),” *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 76, No. 897 (October 1995), p. 455.

requirement to learn “how to think.”²² In doing so correctly, we can be truly objective and see things as they are. In the study of the doctrines and methods of all religions, we are able to discern between the Real and the illusory—or the Absolute and the relative—while being afforded a path that takes us home to the One.

Stoddart invariably contemplated the spiritual traditions from a universal perspective and had a compelling vision of their abiding unity in ultimate reality. Stoddart strongly challenged the assumption that, if one were to recognize the truth of a foreign religion, it would undermine a commitment to one’s own tradition. To acknowledge the validity of other religions ought not to weaken faith in one’s own. At the same time, he saw that it was not enough to simply affirm diverse religious manifestations and their unity, but that we needed to pursue a salvific path wholeheartedly: “We must be capable of the cardinally important intuition that *every religion*—be it Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam—*comes from God and every religion leads back to God.*”²³

Stoddart was constantly responding to an influx of correspondence from friends, readers, and seekers, who sought him out for guidance on spiritual matters. He also received numerous visitors and was warmly remembered for his generous hospitality. His advice never failed to meet the individual needs of those who required direction. When speaking to people, he would communicate using as few words as possible.

Stoddart considered the role of beauty in one’s life to be paramount. He always encouraged reflection on Schuon’s teachings about the aesthetic quality of our abode, dress, and comportment. His own

²² Frithjof Schuon, quoted in James S. Cutsinger, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*, trans. and ed. James S. Cutsinger (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. xxxii.

²³ William Stoddart, “Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School,” in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 32.

home was decorated in a graceful manner, thus embodying Plato's dictum that "Beauty is the splendor of the True." Stoddart was always a gentleman and deeply compassionate in his dealings with others; yet, when he felt compelled to correct someone on a matter of doctrine, he would not hesitate to say—with great care and concern—that he was spiritually obliged to do so.

The wide range of Stoddart's writings include: *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (1976; second edition: *Outline of Sufism: The Essentials of Islamic Spirituality*, 2012); *Outline of Hinduism* (1993; second edition: *Hinduism and Its Spiritual Masters*, 2007); *Outline of Buddhism* (1998; second edition: *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality*, 2013); *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism* (2008); *What do the Religions say about Each Other? Christian Attitudes towards Islam, Islamic Attitudes towards Christianity* (2008); and *What Does Islam Mean in Today's World? Religion, Politics, Spirituality* (2012). Stoddart's contribution was not confined to just his own literary accomplishments; he also translated several traditionalist works from the original French and German: *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (1981) and *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (1981); over 3000 poems by Schuon, and many outstanding volumes by Burckhardt, such as: *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (1967); *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art* (1987); and *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations* (2005). Stoddart regarded Burckhardt as the "right hand of Truth."

Stoddart was spiritually present and alert until the very end. His presence will be very much missed; yet he would not want us to dwell on his departure from this world, but rather have us pay attention to our own *path of return* through a dedicated relationship to the Spirit. He never tired of reminding people that, in Schuon's *opus*, there was everything necessary to sustain our spiritual journey back to the Divine, yet we needed first and foremost to be rooted in

one of the authentic revealed spiritual traditions that have been bequeathed to humanity. It is through the doorway of tradition that we may apprehend the unanimity to be found among all the great religions. We pray that our dear friend has made a swift return to his heavenly abode: “Verily we belong to God and unto Him we shall return” (Qur’ān 2:152).