

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HERLIHY: *The Spiritual Psychology of the Religio Perennis*

— Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: *You have authored numerous books about spiritual traditions of the world, including sacred science or *sciencia sacra*, and spiritual psychology; one sees an underlying gestalt. Could you elucidate on your theoretical orientation?*

John Herlihy: After I became Muslim in 1974, by some fortuitous blessing of fate, I came in contact with the modern writers of the perennial tradition, most notably René Guénon (1886–1951), one of whose books, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), I found in a dusty, second-hand bookshop in Lower Manhattan. One book led to another, and for ten years I immersed myself in the writings of the perennial tradition, including such luminaries as Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), and of course the still active and contemporary Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

Eventually, I wrote several books on the reasons for my conversion to Islam and my experience as a Muslim in the modern world. After many discussions with Muslims and non-Muslims, I turned my attention to exploring and eventually elaborating upon the discrepancies and conflicts that exist between the traditional and modern worldviews; partly because it remains the conflict *sine qua non* that defines the true crisis of contemporary life, and partly because this conflict lies within us as we live through and experience the overall aura and ambience of the modern world, whether we are devout believers in one of the religious traditions trying to adapt to the harsh realities of the secular, materialistic, and progressive worldview,

or sincere individuals who have been drawn, unintentionally perhaps, into the depths of the modern, scientific philosophy—the questionable offspring of the modern scientific worldview.

Four of my latest books explore this crisis. *Modern Man at the Crossroads* deals with the question of origins—of the universe, of life, and of man—within both the traditional and modern worldviews. *Near and Distant Horizons* attempts to answer the perennial question: How do we know what we know? In other words, what are the sources of knowledge within the two conflicting perspectives, and what lends these sources their authenticity and believability? I then moved forward with the book *Borderlands of the Spirit* that seeks to explore the true meaning and significance of the human faculties, including intuition, intelligence, reason, heart knowledge, the higher emotions, and spiritual instincts, again from both the traditional and modern scientific points of view. Finally, my latest work, *Wisdom of the Senses*, touches upon the five senses, and the ubiquitous sixth sense, that help us live in the world; but that also lead us inward and upward in search of that higher reality that gives substance and meaning to the human faculties and physical sense experience.

SBS: *Could you please articulate how you became interested in the spiritual psychology of the perennial philosophy as you are not a therapist by training or profession?*

JH: You make an interesting point and one that I unashamedly acknowledge in several of my books. One should not pretend to speak or write on matters if you are drawing from

an empty well or dried-up spring. I am neither guru nor meditation teacher, nor clinical psychologist; but without giving myself away through a misleading label, I do see myself as someone profoundly interested in coming to terms with my own nature and humanity. If that evokes the term psychology, then so be it. In that sense, perhaps we are all—rough cuts of some master sculptor—in search of an understanding of our true human nature and how it effectively plays out through the destiny of our lives.

SBS: *What would you identify as the essential differences between modern psychology (the four “forces”: behaviorism, psychoanalysis, humanistic, transpersonal) and spiritual psychology?*

JH: This could be taken as a complicated question calling for a delicate answer; but instead I will try to give a simple answer. To my simple straightforward mind, uncluttered perhaps with a lot of academic and theoretical book learning on the multiple differentiations that exist across the development of modern-day psychology along the lines of those you mention in your question, the major difference lies in the understanding of the soul. Islam, which is the religious tradition that I am most familiar with through study and practice, speaks of two things within the revelatory verses of the Quran. Firstly, the human being—the Quranic terminology is *insan*—is clearly identified as having a human “nature” (referred to specifically as *fitrah* in the Quran) which is “pure”, created in the “image of God”, meaning that the *insan* is a mirror reflection of God’s qualities and attributes, which again are

identified in the Quran through His ninety-nine Names. The human *fitrah* is also understood through clear revelations to be original and unique to the human being; as such, the *insan* stands erect, the human *alif* as it were, with the ability to articulate in words what reason and cognitive thinking draw upon from the well of human consciousness. Secondly, the verses of the Quran clearly articulate in words the meaning and significance of the human soul.

The first of the three degrees of soul that exist within humanity is called in Quranic terminology the *nafs al-ammaarah* or *the soul that commands to evil* (12:53).

This is the aspect of soul that is inclined toward the evil alternative, or in modern terms the passionate and egocentric soul. The second aspect of soul is identified as the *nafs al-lawwaamah* or *the soul that blames* (76:2). This is the aspect of the soul that we understand today as human conscience when the soul blames itself, is aware of its own imperfections, and serves as the inner voice that persuades a person to repent and turn away from any shortcomings and evils.

The third degree of soul is called in the Quran the *nafs al-mutma'innah* or *the soul at peace* (89:27). This is an aspect of soul with the potential for perfection and enlightenment resulting in the peace that is the *conditio sine qua non* of the abiding spirit. In other words, what is specifically and clearly identified in the Quran as the key components of humanity and are reflections in varied form of what the other religious traditions understand, are at best the subject of theoretical speculation within the modern, psychological schools of thought that have trouble coming to terms with the elusive nature of humanity's human nature and soul.

SBS: *Given that the perennial philosophy illustrates that the practice of a tradi-*

tional spiritual form is indispensable to an authentic spiritual path, in what context would one practice such a psychology? You have already made a note of your own spiritual affiliation to Islam—would you say that in order to practice an authentic spiritual psychology, one would need to be participating in a revealed tradition?

JH: I deplore dogmatism in any form, and therefore I am reluctant to state categorically that, in order to experience an authentic spiritual psychology, one would need to participate in a revealed spiritual tradition. Yet, what is truly at stake here is a clear understanding of the words we use to describe more profound processes of mind and how they relate to us within



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our individual lives. We use words such as spirituality, spiritual psychology, revelation, and tradition as if we know what they mean and what they can do for us. If I say “yes” to the need to adhere to a fixed religious tradition, there may well be howls of derision from those who lay claim to the free enterprise of finetuning one's inner psychological composition with the dictates of their most heartfelt and humanistic desires. If I say “no”, I may well end up betraying the basis of the spiritual traditions whose religious (and perennial) forms lay claim to that special grace (what Islam calls *barakah*) that draws its blessing exclusively from the sacred form of revelation that not only begins but substantiates the essence of

the religion. In following the prayer ritual as a spiritual discipline in Islam, one is partaking of a revealed ritual when the Archangel Gabriel showed the Prophet Mohammed the ritual prostrations of the Islamic prayer.

Individuals have to make their own judgment calls when it comes to following a revealed spiritual tradition or their own native instincts. The certitude of one's beliefs is what is at stake. If true certitude lies within the mind and heart, there is no room left for wondering. Isn't that what we all want to achieve?

SBS: *A challenging facet of the spiritual psychology of both humanistic and transpersonal psychologies is that they developed along similar lines of modern psychology, which has its origins in the Newtonian–Cartesian paradigm. Can a psychology that has emerged via modern science bridge the isthmus of these two distinct and conflicting dimensions—the traditional or perennial and that of the modern or post-modern? It is important to recall that the perennial philosophy is one of the central tenets of transpersonal psychology and is also vital to humanistic psychology.*

JH: Let's try to look at it from the following point of view. Modern science has come to discover both certified facts as well as thrilling technological applications that traditional peoples over the millennia and former high civilizations never dreamed of. I am not going to mention worn-out statements such as the flat earth, the 6-day creation, or that the sun circumambulates the earth as errors within the religious traditions since the Quran itself has clear verses that elaborate upon earthly and planetary orbits and open-ended notions of time when one of the revelatory verses mentions that a day to our reckoning is (or could be) 50,000 years in divine reckoning. Certainly, such discoveries as the strange (and indeterminate) world of quantum physics and the biochemical findings relating to DNA and the genetic code of life are miraculous unfoldings of the modern scientific inquiry that not only cannot be denied as facts, but that may reinforce

rather than denigrate and deny the sacred truths that the *religio perennis* has proclaimed through the ages. Similarly, if the developments within the evolving perceptions of modern psychology—such as the trends and advanced theories emerging out of the research of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies—uncovers facets and aspects of the human psyche that genuinely address the issues and problems of people living within the modern era that the ancients never had to confront and deal with, and provides direction and guidance to a needy public that is suffering from ills and misfortunes that are the direct result of a world adrift or in ruins of its former self because of the contingencies and circumstances of our own creation, then I do, indeed, see a passageway and bridge between the two conflicting philosophies that have set themselves up now as worldviews vying for the attention of the public. Why not envision a marriage of the essential truths that are both metaphysical and universally accepted as profound revelation from another dimension together with the astounding discoveries and their consequent applications to address the problems that people confront in the modern world? The antagonism and confrontation between the traditional and modern scientific worldviews has solved nothing and has gained no traction within either camp, except perhaps to further entrench people within their own narrow and limited worldview. It is not

good enough to be right. We must not only know something to be true; but we must internalize and live that truth as a matter of second nature. What is the good of knowing about the quantum world or the existence of DNA if that knowledge cannot be channeled in such a way that we become better persons in touch with the totality of who we really are, in truth.

SBS: *Do human individuals in the Kali-Yuga need therapy or a form of modern psychology to complement their spiritual practice as has been suggested by some contemporary therapists, or is this a mistaken idea that traditional spiritual methods cannot address what is integrally human, embracing the tripartite structure of the human microcosm consisting of Spirit, soul, and body?*

JH: Even individuals who are not familiar with the term *Kali-Yuga* as the “end days” of a final cycle are not surprised when it is explained to them because they know that the modern world has also created well nigh insurmountable problems not only across the earth, but especially within the psyche of humanity, both individual and collective. Most people in my experience enjoy the benefits that the modern world offers them; but many people have yet to come to terms with the full extent of the implications of the modern scientific worldview. Even if they give lip service to the idea that we have evolved over geological time—all those millions and billions of years that science loves to refer to—evolved somehow from genetically related species in the simian world, in their heart of hearts

they don't like the idea because its true meaning and implications escape them and they can't relate to the concept. I would venture to say that it makes people uncomfortable because it does not offer them what I referred to earlier in Islam as a true, original, human nature with a soul that not only “blames” but also a soul that is “at peace”. Islam and the other traditions of the perennial philosophy offer an integrated spiritual psychology that is grounded in revelation, identifies its sources of knowledge through Revelation, Nature, and Mankind, and provides the spiritual disciplines to internalize that knowledge within our minds and hearts. In principle, humanity does not need to wait for the theoretical speculation of modern-day philosophies and psychologies in order to come to terms with its own inner nature. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, meditation, etc., have provided a spiritual methodology for millenia as a means to enter the channels of blessing and grace that will ultimately bring peace and certitude to the believing soul.

SBS: *With regard to what has been referred to as the quintessential spiritual method of the Kali-Yuga, could you speak about the invocation of the Divine Name or ceaseless prayer and what different religious traditions or the philosophia perennis has referred to as japa-yoga in Hinduism, Nembutsu in Buddhism, the “Jesus Prayer” or the “Prayer of the Heart” in Christianity, Dhikr in Islam (Sufism), also found in the Shamanic traditions? How is this type of prayer pivotal for integral health and well-being in divinas,*

JOHN HERLIHY'S BOOKS

Wisdom of the Senses: The Untold Story (2010) Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies

The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity (ed.) (2009) Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom

Wisdom's Journey: Living the Spirit of Islam in the Modern World (2009) Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom

Journeys With Soul: Adventures and Cures That Came True (2008) Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis

Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind (2005) Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom

Near and Distant Horizons (2005) Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis

Modern Man at the Crossroads: The Encounter of Modern Science and Traditional Knowledge (1999) Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications

Veils and Keys: Possibilities of a Contemporary Spirituality in the Light of Traditional Islamic Wisdom (1998)

Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen

In Search of the Truth: Contemporary Reflections on Traditional Islamic Themes (1990) Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Pustaka Islam

as well as for the psycho-physical dimension all-together?

JH: Every spiritual and religious tradition within the framework of the perennial philosophy has clearly spoken about both ritual or ceremonial prayer and the inner or ceaseless prayer of the heart. In Islam, the ritual prayer is merely an extension of the first pillar of Islam in the form of the *Shahadah* or Testimony of Faith that “there is no god but the one God” and that “Mohammed is His Messenger.” The *Shahadah* is the ceaseless remembrance of God in all our thoughts and desires, and if its perpetual remembrance is not always possible, then the five ritual prayers bring us back to the remembrance of God five times a day. The prayer ritual was one aspect of Islam that intrigued me initially and that I soon found to be a powerful means, or indeed a rigorous spiritual discipline, that pulled me back from the brink time and again through the course of a day full of demands, frustrations, emotional highs and lows, moodiness, and bad temperedness, not to mention the tendency of doing the wrong thing in spite of good intentions. At five key points of the day, dictated by the movement of the sun—namely the prayer of *fajr* or first light, the meridian of noontime, the mid-afternoon prayer when “shadow equals the man (or woman)”, sunset, and finally the moment of absolute darkness—the Muslims have the opportunity to pause and turn their thoughts to the remembrance of God through the ablution and prayer ritual as a means on centering oneself—and the psyche and soul—on “the one thing needful”. In return, one becomes mindful of the certitude and peace that is the promise of the word *islam*.

SBS: Can you speak about the essential distinctions between Self and ego, Intellect (intellectus) and reason (ratio), and Personality and individuality that are crucial to the perennialist critique of modern psychology known as psychologism confusing the relative with the Absolute?

JH: In English, we shift back and forth from articulating the concept of the self and the soul as if there were identifiable distinctions between the two words on the operative and practical level of spirituality, when in fact there is no distinctive qualifier that effectively separates these two words in the minds of most people. The words are used interchangeably or are chosen at random, usually for some kind of effect or as a personal preference. It is really this random and arbitrary use of words and ideas within a given philosophy of life that are not grounded either within a sacred tradition or a divine revelation that can cause confusion and conflicts of interest in the minds of many people today. In Islam, for example, nothing is arbitrary or man-made; every key concept finds its root source within the seed-words of revelation and over history has developed clear and distinctive meanings that even the average man and woman understands and feels comfortable with. As such, the word *self* or *soul*, in Quranic Arabic, is *nafs*, and there is no confusing or denying its fundamental and essential meaning to the average Muslim. As mentioned earlier, the *nafs* has three distinctive levels or degrees of expression, and everyone in Islam knows what they mean. Similarly, the word *intellect* has revelatory, Quranic roots that are there to behold and experience among the verses. The intellect, in reflection of the Transcendent Intellect, is that supreme faculty that can conceptualize the idea of a Supreme Being within the realm of metaphysics as a universal principle and understand it directly as a matter of spiritual instinct. It is supra-rational as opposed to the infra-rational intuitions that people speak of today in their everyday life. Reason, on the other hand, is a strictly human faculty. The intellect lies beyond the capacities of reason with its lateral thinking and logical deductions. Reason is a ladder that will lead us to higher realms when the higher inner faculty of the intelligence and the intellect click in with their higher-level functions and perceptions. The “I”, or the ego in modern parlance, repre-

sents the individuality of the person as such in this world. The life of the I and the ego only, without the soul (self), without spiritual intelligence that can discern right from wrong, and without the higher intellect that can understand “at a glance” the essential and metaphysical knowledge of God, is a life lived within a closed system, egocentric and confined within itself as in a prison. It is not surprising that many people today feel trapped without knowing precisely why or how to deal with it. Such an ego has no means of escaping his/her own mode of existence and represents nothing more than a transitory and contingent manifestation of the real being that lies within.

SBS: The idea that man is essentially theomorphic in essence or *Homo spiritualis* according to the traditional doctrines of the perennial philosophy may be foreign to therapists and students of modern psychology. Would you say that man's true identity is transpersonal and that it underscores the essential human identity at the heart of all spiritual traditions?

JH: Within the Islamic framework, and indeed within the perennial tradition generally, the *insan* (referred to earlier as “man” or “mankind” and in Arabic meaning both men and women) is indeed a *Homo spiritus* by virtue of the very spirit that infuses the physical body with the breath of life. The Quran refers to Allah as virtually breathing into the mixture of water and earth that He had “fashioned” from clay, the very Spirit of God through the breath (incidentally the words *breath* and *soul* in Arabic have the same three-consonant root). The term *Homo sapiens* derived from Latin, while the word *man* is a cognate of the Sanskrit *manu*, meaning the progenitor of humanity. Even at superficial levels, this term has an element of magic about it that is meaningful. Nothing is wrong with the concept of the “wise man” if we understand the concept of wisdom within its natural and traditional setting. The Taoists speak of “true man”, and the Muslims refer to the “perfected man” and the “universal

man". There is no dark mystery to what all these encoded, symbolic concepts mean, and all those who partake of an authentic, religious, and spiritual tradition are familiar with and understand the terminology. The true, perfected, and universal man is what we are in our essence, as mirror reflections of the Supreme Being who created us, Who has infused us with the qualities and attributes that define His true Nature. He has given us the inner faculties, not only that we can live in and understand the world; but also so that we can express the reality of our higher nature and spirit in which the true and universal man within us serves as the highest goal that we can achieve here on earth.

We live within a borderland between the "spirit of the world" and the "world of the spirit", and we walk in the "shadow of God". We have at our disposal an integral—indeed fully integrated and conceptually perfected—sacred psychology within

the religious traditions that already serve people well; all we need to do is recognize its value for what it truly is and draw upon its guidance and blessing as we fulfill our destiny within the human condition.

SBS: *You have alluded to the following question in your previous response, yet could you say more about whether modern psychology can add anything "new" or "novel" to the spiritual psychology of the perennial philosophy?*

JH: Over the course of years and through the valiant efforts of many good-willed researchers, modern psychology has uncovered a wealth of information that was not known to people of more traditional times. Also, modern psychology addresses many issues that have arisen within the context of the modern world, raised their profile as it were, and that forces both modern and traditional thinkers to come to terms with these issues in a manner than does not contradict the essential truths identified through the traditional revela-

tions. There is no doubt in my mind that there are many ideas that have emerged from the humanistic and transpersonal philosophies of psychology that do not contradict outright the truths set forth in the religions and may actually contribute to the unfolding and fulfillment of solutions that modern humanity is desperately in need of.

JOHN HERLIHY was born into an Irish-American family in Boston, Massachusetts. He completed studies at a Paulist seminary, then lived and worked abroad most of his life as a professor of academic writing in Middle and Far Eastern universities. He currently works in Abu Dhabi at the University of Science, Technology, and Research as a special advisor to its President. In addition to his numerous books, he has written for the journals Sacred Web and Sophia.

SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS has received graduate degrees in Education and in Psychology. He has travelled throughout the world to visit sacred sites, and had contact with noted spiritual authorities. He currently works as a mental health clinician in Northern California.

Finding Mindfulness in Cancer

— Paul Rest

Last year, I was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue. I had led a healthy life, eating organic food as much as possible and exercising often. I was also a dedicated student of Aikido, as both a martial and spiritual discipline. So the words coming out of the doctor's mouth seemed strange to my ears, falling some place on my body other than my mind. He went on about my percentages for survival and other statistical and medical facts that he felt I needed to know. The notes I was taking seemed to be written by some other person. I found myself wondering who was there: the Paul with cancer or the Paul whom the moment before was seemingly cancer-free. I hoped my friend whom I had asked to come with me had all this? The doctor earnestly shook my hand saying we'd begin the therapies he

had outlined ("Did we write these down?" I wondered) next week.

I summoned up my courage and told myself, "I can do this!" I even took an Aikido class the evening after my first chemotherapy. I felt a little strange, but nothing that I felt would knock me off my center. The radiation was more difficult. I had to wear a tight plastic mask over my head, which was bolted to a metal table so I would remain motionless. Again, after realizing that I could find the space for movement that is part of the Aikido training I had had, I was able to relax my mind and body and wear the terrifying mask with some degree of calmness....

However, as my treatments progressed, and as my doctors had predicted, I became weaker and weaker. I couldn't swallow or eat, so all liquids and nutrition had to be pumped directly into my

stomach through a surgically inserted tube. My daughter flew up from Southern California to care-take me twice. Even taking a shower became a major effort. I had to support myself with one or the other hand. My balance, my hara, my center, seemed to have deserted me.

I also began to lose an alarming amount of weight. My clothes hung on me. My once robust frame was reduced to my pre-high-school weight. I had no muscle tone. I felt as if the cure for what could have potentially killed me was eating at my flesh and bones, doing what the cancer would have done, reducing me to nothingness. I'd look at myself in the mirror after my beard fell out and wonder who the ghost of the person was that I was seeing? Between the treatments and the cancer, I began asking myself, "What else did I have to give?" Everything seemed to