

Response to the Questions of Ahmet Faruk Çağlar

I need to say at the outset that I do not call myself a “traditionalist,” nor do I consider myself the member of any school of thought. I acknowledge that I learned a great deal from authors who are commonly called “traditionalist,” such as Frithjof Schuon. When I discovered Schuon’s writings as a fourth-year university student, I was able to conceptualize many doubts that I had about the American dream, not least the utter contradiction between its utopian ideals and the actual horrors brought about by technological competence (the “military-industrial complex” as President Eisenhower famously called it).

Before answering the first question, let me say something about your premises. You say, “the falsification of all these primeval religions and beliefs, despite their divine origin, is confirmed by the very words of Quran and therefore indisputable.” As far I understand from my readings in the Islamic intellectual tradition, there is no basis for saying that the “falsification” of previously revealed religions is “indisputable.” Anyone who studies a range of Quran commentaries on the verses that might be interpreted in the way you suggest will discover that Muslim scholars provided a variety of interpretations, not all of them suggesting that previous religions were no longer valid.

Let me remind you that the vast majority of Muslims (and followers of other religions as well) take their beliefs from preachers and religious popularizers, who try to conceal the subtlety and ambiguity of the scriptural sources by emphasizing certain sides of the message and ignoring others. As a general rule they stress God’s majesty, wrath, and justice. They insist that God has spoken clearly and has said only one thing and that, if you do not follow it, He will send you to hell. At the same time, there has always been another type of religious scholar who has not taken upon himself the task of guiding the common people and hence saw no need to play down the ambiguities of the message and the overriding mercy of the Divine Reality. Such scholars emphasized the Quranic verse, *wa rahmati wasi’at kulla shay’*, “My mercy embraces everything” (7:156). They also liked to cite the hadith, “God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath.” They understood this precedence not in temporal terms, but ontologically. In other words, they said that God is fundamentally merciful and compassionate, and only accidentally wrathful.

Scholars of this second category recognized that God created all beings to be precisely what they are, and He is driving all of creation to its appropriate perfection. The appropriate perfection of human beings, who are infinitely diverse, is to know and love God in their own measures. Of course they cannot know and love God in God’s measure, because only God knows the measure of God: “They have not measured God with the rightful due of His measure” (Quran 6:91, 22:74, 39:67). It seems self-evident to me, and it is clearly indicated by the Quran, that from the time of Adam God has shown His mercy in infinitely diverse ways, not least in the continued presence of prophetic guidance, and that His all-embracing mercy will extend forever.

Those who claim that Islam abrogates previous religions seem to think that God is rather incompetent, for He could not send messages that would continue in effect. And when He did send Islam, they seem to believe, He gave such weak arguments and proofs to it that the majority of the human race ignored it. So, they think, God will throw into the Fire everyone who does not accept “Islam”—interpreted, of course, in terms of their

own narrow belief systems. This is the view of a God whose mercy does not in fact embrace everyone and whose wrath is His essential attribute. But such a view of God is unknown in the Quran and the Hadith, and it is rejected by numerous significant scholars and saints over Islamic history.

As for your first questions: “What is the use of the effort for discovering the hidden aspects of [primeval religions and beliefs], trying to find the divine traces in them, tracing some mutual facts with Islam?” Perhaps for you there is no use. Does that mean there is no use for every Muslim under the sun? To claim that it is useless for everyone, because it is useless for me, would be extreme arrogance. In my own view, once we recognize that that all the great religions still bear witness to the prophetic messages that established them, investigating any one of them can be useful to someone who is tired of the arrogance and narrow-mindedness of preachers and ideologues. Many people of faith become disgusted with the self-righteousness of those who claim to speak for their religion. Such spokesmen too often have adopted the motto of Iblis in the Quran, which is ana khayrun minhu, “I am better than he.” They say, in effect, “My religion is better than every other religion”—and again, I remind you that everyone’s “Islam” can only be in the measure of his or her own understanding and practice. In fact, of course, the only thing we know for certain about being “better” is that God is better than all of us. He is more merciful than everyone, and He is infinitely beyond our feeble attempts to grasp His wisdom. He established those religions, and who are we to claim that we are rightly guided, when most of us know very little about our own religions and practice them even less?

“How necessary is the study of those religions and what can it bring to us?” Who said that it is necessary? And who is the “us” to whom you refer? You seem to have the strange idea that everyone is the same, that “one size fits all.” Socks are made that way, but not shoes or religions. There is a well-known hadith, ikhtilâf ummatî rahma, “The disagreement of my community is a mercy.” This is so because every human individual is unique, and people cannot be forced into one shape. They need many different interpretations of the same Quranic verses in order to find the “Straight Path,” which is the path that leads from each soul directly to God’s mercy. I also understand this hadith concerning the “disagreement of my community” in a broader sense. The Quran says that the Prophet was sent rahmatan li’l-‘alamin, “as a mercy to the worlds.” Hence the Prophet’s words “the disagreement of my community” can refer to all the worlds of all human beings, the entire human race from Adam to the end of time. According to standard Islamic teachings, all 124,000 prophets are the Prophet’s followers, for he was a prophet “when Adam was between water and clay.” All of the prophets, like him, have been spreading the same message of mercy. Therefore the many disagreements among the prophets and within their communities can be manifestations of the same divine mercy.

It seems to me that, religiously speaking, it is of utmost importance to come to an understanding of one’s own situation in the universe. No one can achieve this without an understanding of God. Most people do not study their own religions, much less God. They base their beliefs on hearsay. They follow the prevalent worldview, whether it be a religious worldview or, more likely nowadays, the scientific worldview, which in practice denies the basic religious truths, which are enumerated in Islamic terms as tawhîd, prophecy, and the Return to God (ma’ad). In other words, people simply take as true

what they have heard from parents, society, teachers, preachers, scientists—whoever they think is qualified to know the truth. Generally people don't ask questions, but rather follow their trusted authorities like sheep. Muslims are no different from anyone else in this. They are just as blindly obedient to their society and culture as others, and perhaps more so, because their religion is often the only stable anchor left in their lives.

In my own experience as a teacher, I find Muslim students especially blameworthy, because even though they have, as you put it, a “right path in a clear and uncomplicated way,” they take that path for granted—that is, if they accept it. As a result they think that the search for knowledge that is incumbent on every Muslim is fulfilled by becoming a doctor or an engineer. In pre-modern times, the search for knowledge was always the search to know oneself in relation to God. Nowadays, however, Muslims are content to learn a few rules and then get on with their busy lives in the world, their professions and occupations, their wives and their children. “We have the best religion,” many of them seem to think, “so there is no need to do anything about it.” This is sheer ignorance of the quest for knowledge and wisdom that used to give life to their religion, a quest that is now largely moribund.

Question: “Does it necessarily mean that other religions contain some wisdom which Islam lacks and that a Muslim can't obtain them without studying those religions?” No, not “necessarily.” But this does not mean that learning about other religions cannot be useful, or even life-changing. It depends on who you are, on what you know about your own Islam, and on how serious you are about learning what you should do with your life. Studying another religion is like studying another language, because another religion represents a different manner of communicating the same ultimate truths. If you have never studied a foreign language, you have no idea what is peculiar about your own language. You only learn the special nature of your language when you study a foreign language. And anyone who is completely bilingual knows that there are always things that you can say in one language but you cannot quite say in the other language.

Religions are different divine languages, because, as the Quran says, God sent every messenger in the language of his people. Nowadays, when people can barely talk their own religious and cultural languages—and you Turks are especially deprived because you have been cut off from your heritage by the change of script—it can be useful to study another language in order to see what is special about your language. My own experience is that many students only learn to appreciate their own religions once they study another religion. Over the years I have had several students tell me that they spent many years in Catholic grammar schools and high schools, but they never understood what the teachers were trying to say about Christianity. Once they took my course on Islam, they suddenly realized what their own religion was all about, and as a result they had become serious Christians. And most of my Muslim students, especially those who have gone to Quran schools, tell me that my courses expose them to a much wider and more illuminating view of Islam than they had ever heard from their own religious teachers.

Question: “In other words, do the other religions despite the alteration/falsification they were exposed to, still contain some recognisable perennial wisdom in them?” First, of course, to say that other religions have been altered/falsified is an interpretation of the Quran that I find unsustainable. Moreover, do you not see that Islam itself has undergone all sorts of alterations and falsifications at the hands of various

teachers and preachers, especially in the last few decades? Even if you think that these changes have happened in other religions and not in Islam, the answer to your question can only be another question: Do you mean to tell me that, in this world of ours where so many religions are now available for scrutiny (something that was impossible even 100 years ago), you have never looked at writings about or by the saints and sages of other religions? There are numerous works available in European languages from all the great religions that overflow with wisdom and compassion. Of course, if you are convinced that Islam is true and all else is false, you would never bother to look. But if you wonder a bit about what happened to all that wisdom that God taught to the other prophets, you will find that it is still available in a great variety of forms from many different sources. If you are happy in your own narrow universe, fine. Others may wonder about God's infinite mercy and omnipresent wisdom, and they will be more open to receiving wisdom from wherever it comes, seeing in other religions straightforward confirmation of the Quran's insistence that God sent messages to all peoples. Here I am reminded of the famous hadith, "Wisdom is the believer's stray camel. He takes it back wherever he finds it." The world is full of the believers' stray camels, but people do not realize that their own camels are found all over the world, waiting to be found.

Question: "Can we assume that all traditionalists have had problems with some Western values/ideals all along...?" The issue is not that of West against East. It is, as the traditionalists have always insisted, that of modernity against tradition. I do not have the time to define modernity. Let me just say that modernity's essence is the rejection of the truths that all religions hold sacred. These truths are summed up nicely by Islam's three principles of faith: tawhîd, prophecy, and the Return. All religions accept that the Ultimate Reality is One. All of them acknowledge that wisdom and guidance come from that Reality alone; that humans are not capable of finding permanent happiness without the help of God. And all of them acknowledge that death is simply a transferal to another realm of being, and which point human beings will meet with the repercussions of their own thoughts, character traits, and activities. Modernity rejects these three truths. Christianity and Judaism, both of which you might call Western religions, accept these three truths. Guénon was criticizing modernity, not the West. He became a Muslim because in France he could not find practical guidance in the path to God. That does not mean he rejected the truths taught by Christianity, far from it.

I have no interest in "isms," whether traditionalism or Guénonism. I read Guénon when I was in my early 20s at the same time I read Schuon, and I understood both of them to be teaching that "tradition" is a generic term designating the revealed religions, and each of these religions offers a unique path to God. People will find their way to God not by following "traditionalism" but by following one of the revealed religions. As for Guénon's life, I know nothing about it. I have never had much interest in personalities and biographies. Trying to understand what people say in terms of their histories and psychologies is a modern obsession.

As for the appeal of Sufism to Westerners, this has many reasons. One is the increasing politicization of the Islamic world over the past two hundred years, and the resulting focus on progress, development, and other such goals of modernity. In modern "Islamic" movements, Westerners tend to see religious fanaticism in the service of social and political goals. They do not see any essential difference between "Islam" and their own Christian or Jewish fundamentalisms—they see the same narrow-mindedness, the

same bigotry, the same hatred for others. In contrast, when they come across “Sufism,” they typically meet it in the form of beautiful poetry. They hear a message of love, compassion, wisdom, kindness, and human goodness. These characteristics are attractive to anyone who has a healthy psyche.

Somewhere Ibn Arabi wrote that Muslims believe that anyone who has heard the message of Islam and has not accepted it will be rejected by God. This is true, he said, but where is the message of Islam these days? (Remember that Ibn Arabi was writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century). In fact, he said, God will not blame anyone who rejects the message that is being taught today in the name of Islam, for these teachers are not in fact presenting the Islam of the Quran and the Prophet. Ibn Arabi saw that during his own time, a century that produced numerous great Muslim teachers and saints, preachers were distorting Islam for their own personal benefit and to gain power and influence over people. This phenomenon is also common today, and too often it is connected with violence. Why would any Westerner be attracted to this sort of religiosity when it is little different from home-grown Western religious movements? The writings of great Sufis, however—people like Rumi and Ibn Arabi—offer them a window into a world of beauty and love, anchored in faith in God, the prophets, and the return to God. “God is beautiful,” said the Prophet, “and He loves beauty.” God made people in His own image. People also love beauty, and the beautiful forms of Islam are typically associated with Sufism.

Let me also add that I am not saying that Sufism is something different from authentic Islam. As I have written over and over again, “Sufism” understood properly designates the living heart of Islam. It is Sufism that gives life and meaning to the practices of the Shariah and the teachings of the theologians. If Sufism in this meaning is lacking, then we are dealing with Islam’s body without its spirit. It is natural for healthy people to be repulsed by a body that is kept moving by some alien force, much like a zombie.

Question: “Can we interpret... an attempt of Western civilisation to reconstruct itself?” If you like. I, however, am not comfortable about personifying “Western civilisation.” It is much too broad a term to designate anything real. If you mean to ask, “Are some Westerners looking for alternatives to the ruling paradigms of our age?”, certainly the answer is yes. Is it a significant movement? It depends on whom you ask. If you ask most intellectuals or politicians or opinion-makers, they will tell you that it is insignificant. If you ask those individuals whose lives have been utterly transformed by making contact with traditional teachings—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, or whatever—they will tell you that it is the most significant part of their lives.

Do I think Western civilization is going to change its course toward disaster? No, it has gone much too far already. Does that mean we should give up hope? Hope of what? Why should you or I have “hope” in “Western civilization”? Hope is one of the two wings with which the soul flies to God (the other being fear). In both cases, the object is God. If you keep hope and fear in proper balance, then God is near, and that is the only thing that truly matters. Let Western civilization go where it will. It is neither my problem nor yours. On the Day of Judgment God will not ask me or you why we did not try to save the West. Rather, He will ask, “Why did you not try to save yourself?”

Question: “Does also Traditionalism have a tendency of creating a past where everything was imagined to be one and whole?” First of all, it is a general teaching of the religions, Islam being no exception, that the most perfect time was when Adam was in paradise. Nonetheless, Adam forgot and ate the fruit. Adam was then sent to the earth to be God’s khalifa, and he did a good job of it, yet Cain killed his brother Abel. So the story goes—prophet after prophet, reminder after reminder, and still people forget. The most massive forgetfulness in human history has occurred since the death of the last prophet, whose mission established the religion of Islam. Anyone who thinks that things have improved since the Prophet’s days is certainly employing standards not derived from Islamic teachings (nor from those of any other revealed religion). I do not think that “traditionalists” have any illusions about the past. The issue is not that society was “one and whole,” certainly not. Not even in the Prophet’s day was that true, and look at what happened the moment he died. The issue is rather what has been lost and what has been gained. You do not need much imagination to see that people are infatuated with the things of this world in a way that was impossible in pre-modern times, because the world was so much simpler—no electronic technology, no internet, no news of anyone except family and immediate neighbors. Everyone’s world was tiny compared to our sense of the world, so the meaning of life was easier to find.

Moreover, wherever revealed religion was present—which means just about everywhere—people had a sense of the insignificance of human activity compared to the tremendousness of the divine realm. The contingency of things and souls was not just a philosophical notion, but the lived reality of people not confused by the hubris of “civilization” and “progress.” People knew that they were impotent in face of God. It was only with the Renaissance and later times that people came to believe that they can make themselves and their world without paying attention to divine guidance. Eventually the Western intelligentsia did away with the “hypothesis” of God. This is another way of saying that modernity rejects a priori the basic truths upon which all traditional civilizations were built. Hence, from the standpoint of Islam, or Hinduism, etc., modernity is built on illusion. It is destined to fall apart under its own weight. Guénon, by the way, wrote about this clearly in his book The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times.

Question: “Do you think that complete rejection of Modernism is a reasonable attitude?” If you can define modernism for me, maybe I can answer your question. If modernism means modernity as I have been discussing it, then modernism asks us to reject the divine revelations and to attempt to live without divine guidance. If that is what it is, then what is unreasonable about rejecting modernism? If it means using computers—well, I am just like you in that I find that I can perfectly well maintain my philosophical positions and send e-mail at the same time.

As for your appeal to the wonders of medicine and other manifestations of “progress,” for every positive thing you can say, there are negative things as well. Something gained always means something lost. Ivan Illich wrote a devastating critique of modern medicine in Medical Nemesis forty years ago. If you pay attention to what goes on in the medical field, as I do, you realize that the horrors perpetrated in the name of medicine are no less than the wonders it has worked. In any case, the real issue is not welfare in this world. If you think Islam came to “facilitate our life” in this world and to bring about material “progress,” you are clearly misinformed about the Quran and the

Islamic tradition. Any benefits that people have today because of scientific and technological progress are outweighed by the manner in which the important things in life—that is, God, prophecy, and the destiny of the human soul—are forgotten, ignored, and eventually dismissed as being insignificant. This is the story of the modern world. And as for the “revival” of Islam some people claim to see happening, more often than not this is simply one of the outworn political ideologies of the West decorated with Quranic verses. This is the dessication of the Islamic tradition, its suffocation from ignorance, its immersion in the illusions of modern times, its joining up with the very “modernism” which you say is so much criticised in the Islamic world.

In brief, I do not deny certain “advantages” to living in the modern world, and I thank God for them. However this may be, I had no choice about when I would be alive. Things like that are written for us, and we should try to make the best of what we have. But that does not mean that we should naively think we are better off than people in the Middle Ages because we have cars and washing machines. They needed neither, and, I am convinced, because of the historical and literary remains that we have from those days, that people had a much better sense of what it means to be human, and so they tried harder than we do to live up to what God wants from them. One moment of penurious wakefulness is worth a hundred years of luxurious slumber.

Question: “What are the issues that traditionalists agree and disagree upon with the other critiques of Modernism and which aspects of Traditionalism makes it an original approach?” I am not a historian of the modern West, nor do I have any interest in the various schools of thought that may have critiqued modernity. As for traditionalism, if there is anything “original” about it, I have no interest in that either. The whole point of tradition is that truth and authenticity need to be rooted in the Origin, who is God, and that the keys to truth are found in what has been transmitted from the past, going back to the prophets and messengers. At the same time, tradition needs to be a living tree, which is to say that it is not enough to have roots in the past if the tree has died in the meantime. You seem to think that all trees are dead except Islam, which is absurd. And then you seem to be suggesting that these new saplings, which have been devised by intellectuals in the relatively recent past, can offer us something more than temporary immersion in the passing realm of phenomena—a realm that religion tells us will soon fade away into nonexistence, leaving only the face of the Real.

Question: “Can one assume that the Traditionalist School is a movement that developed in the West and therefore appeals only to westerners (or western Muslims)?” I don’t know, but what you say sounds plausible. What I do know is that tradition is not a western development, but a universal fact of human existence. Everywhere and always people have found the source of wisdom in the past and in the transcendent—both of which are the Origin (in the first case temporally, in the second metaphysically). This has been the human condition, and it changed for the first time in the West, when the educated and cultured elite did away with God—who, your celebrated Nietzsche reminds us, is “dead.” The fact that most people nowadays do not have much time to give service to God, or even lip-service, does not change the reality of the human situation. And the fact that religion has been turned into an idol—that “Islam,” for example, is worshiped in place of God by so many modern Muslims—does not lessen the rising tide of modernism that is occurring everywhere in the world. As for what tradition can offer to a Yemeni villager—I don’t say “traditionalism”—well, of course, the same thing it has always

offered to him: salvation, that is, happiness in the next world, not this world. If the Yemeni villager ever gets as far as the university, then he might find that “traditionalism” can be a way to come back to tradition.

Question: “Do you still feel hopeful about people changing their perception of man, universe and God...?” As far as I am concerned, God is ever merciful, and, as a hadith puts it, the last day will not come as long as one person is truly holding fast to God. Hope is utterly necessary for the human condition, and a divine commandment as well: “Do not despair of God’s mercy—surely God forgives all sins” (Quran 39:53). If 99.999% of the human race forgets God and His mercy, how can that harm those who remember?

Question: “What I want to ask is that apart from providing some sort of psychological satisfaction is there any reality in the assumption that the West being at the dead end despite its material superiority?” The Quran says that anyone who predicts the time of the Hour is lying. I have no thoughts about when the West—and probably the rest of the world along with it—will self-destruct. I have never said that “it is about to collapse.” Nonetheless, few people who look at the power being unleashed by modern scientific advances—the bombs, the genetically modified microbes and viruses, the varieties of poison gas, the power of mental manipulation through the electronic media, and so on—can be optimistic about our chances of keeping the world relatively sane over the long term. In modern times we have learned that we are perfectly capable of bringing about the end of the world through our own efforts; there is no need for the kind of supernatural intervention that people seem to have imagined in the past.

Question: “What are the direct and indirect impacts of Traditionalism in the West (or all around the world)? Was the initial purpose of the school to form an individual awareness? Did it have also some social goals?” I don’t know the answer to any of these questions, because Traditionalism as a school of thought has never held any interest for me, so I have never studied it.

Question: “Is there a possibility for the Traditionalist School making a lasting philosophical impression on the West? Is there any chance for ‘traditionalist thought’ being systematised and evolved into an ontology?” You should ask this question from someone who follows the Traditionalist School. Personally, I am perfectly happy with the answers to questions of philosophy and ontology offered by the likes of Avicenna, Ibn Arabi, and Mulla Sadra. Who needs anything more than that?

Question: “Finally, do you think that there are sufficient academic/theoretical studies on Sufism not only in anglophone countries, but also all around the world? Or does the very nature of the subject in question not allow such a theoretical approach?” No, there are not nearly enough studies, not in anglophone countries, not in Turkophone countries, and certainly not in places like China. Turkey is an especially sad case because of the loss of the Ottoman language, so modern Turks cannot re-attach themselves to their own intellectual heritage unless they learn their great grandparents’ language as if it were a foreign tongue. All Muslim countries are suffering a loss of spiritual grounding because of Islam’s politicization (= modernization) and the resulting hostility toward traditional attitudes and character traits. Muslim modernism has branded Sufism as something alien to Islam, thus cutting Muslims off from the heart of their tradition.

I should add that in my own case, I have found Sufism and Islamic philosophy to be rich sources of traditional wisdom and hence useful supplements to the other sources of wisdom that are readily available in English. I write for English speakers who are curious about God and the human soul and who are open to the idea that God speaks many languages. The fact that various writings of mine have been translated into Islamic languages, from Albanian to Indonesian and everywhere in between, reflects the fact that few modern-day Muslim scholars have the ability to read and understand the major texts of their own intellectual heritage or to explain them in terms that make sense to modern-day people. I discovered the riches of the Islamic tradition by accident, as it were—because of my early exposure to translations of the poetry of Rumi—and this led me to explore his historical and spiritual context. I did this, and I continue to do this, not out of intellectual curiosity but because of a thirst for truth and because of my conviction that the classical Islamic texts are especially skillful at expressing truth and wisdom in an especially accessible and understandable way.