

## Foreword

The recent history of Tibet exemplifies the fate of traditional civilizations in the modern world. Behind the snowy ramparts of the Himalayas, Tibet had stood as one of the last bastions of a way of life which properly deserved to be called traditional—one directed, in the first place, not to a godless ideal of material “progress” but to the spiritual welfare of its people, a culture which, in T.S. Eliot’s phrase, was an incarnation of the religious outlook which informed it. In a sense, Tibet served as a haven for all those principles and ideals, all those aspirations of the human spirit, which were elsewhere being trampled underfoot by the forces of modernity. That the invasion of Tibet and the destruction of its religious culture should be carried out by its neighbor in the name of a profane Western ideology is one of the most bitter ironies of recent history. Let us not mince words: the systematic subversion of Tibet’s religious heritage, the slaughter of its monks and nuns, the sacking of the monasteries, the unceasing violation of human rights, the cynical “population policy” to make Tibetans a minority in their own land, and the desecration of the environment, make the Chinese occupation an imperial vandalism no less appalling than that of the Western powers in so many different parts of the globe in the preceding century.

There are those who make much of the various social abuses and corruptions which, as the present Dalai Lama has conceded, were to be found in Tibet on the eve of the Chinese invasion, as if these could in any measure justify the monstrous brutalities which were to follow. On the other hand, there is nothing to be gained from that sentimental romanticism and nostalgia for the exotic which paints traditional Tibet as a pristine Utopia. Marco Pallis did not fall into either trap.

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In an Appendix to *Peaks and Lamas* and in his Foreword to Chögyam Trungpa's *Born in Tibet* he acknowledged various ills in traditional Tibet and situated them in the proper context. Pallis was well aware of the following admonition of Frithjof Schuon, whose writings proved such an inspiration for his own work:

When the modern world is contrasted with traditional civilizations, it is not simply a question of seeking the good things and the bad things on one side or the other; good and evil are everywhere, so that it is essentially a question of knowing on which side the more important good and on which side the lesser evil is to be found. If someone says that such and such a good exists outside tradition, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the most important good, and it is necessarily represented by tradition; and if someone says that in tradition there exists such and such an evil, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the lesser evil, and again it is tradition that embodies it. It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.<sup>1</sup>

No one with any sense of proportion can for a moment doubt that the good in Tibet's traditional civilization far outweighed the bad, and that something infinitely precious and irreplaceable was destroyed forever by the invading juggernaut.

The peculiar character of Tibetan civilization stemmed from the creative fusion of the indigenous shamanistic tradition of Bön-po with the *Mahayana* Buddhism brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava and the monks of India. From this spiritual intercourse sprang forth the *Vajrayana*, that luminous form of Buddhism which expressed the religious genius of the Tibetan people and which seemed to draw its inspiration from the austere and awesome beauty of Tibet's majestic

<sup>1</sup> *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (London: Perennial Books, 1966), p. 42.

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peaks and vast plateaus. Here, preserved in the monastic lineages and in the customs and institutions of the people, was to be found a spiritual treasury of almost incomparable beauty and richness. We need think no further than the ideal of the Bodhisattva and its resplendent iconography, of Chenrezig, Tara, and Manjushri, of Milarepa, of the long line of Dalai Lamas who embody the ideal of Wisdom-Compassion which lies at the very heart of the tradition.

Marco Pallis was one of a small group of Westerners who had the privilege of experiencing the traditional culture of Tibet in its eventide, visiting the Himalayan regions in 1923, 1933, 1936, and 1947. He was drawn there by his love of mountaineering and, no doubt, by impulses which at the time he himself could only sense as through a glass darkly. So profound was the impact of his early visits that by the mid-1930s Pallis had become a committed *dharma*-practitioner and an initiated member of one of the Tibetan orders. Thenceforth he was to be one of the most eloquent witnesses of the calamity which afflicted his spiritual homeland, one of a small handful of Westerners who alerted the rest of the world to the magnitude of the tragedy which was unfolding in Tibet. He also devoted himself to the explication of Tibetan religious and cultural forms which were still so little understood in the West. At a time when all too many of the Western cognoscenti hailed Buddhism as a kind of rational and humanistic psychology, Pallis' writings served as an implacable reminder of the Transcendent which is the fountainhead of all integral religious traditions and without which all the doings of mortals are nothing. He also exposed counterfeit forms of "Tibetan esotericism," such as the bizarre concoctions conjured up by "Lobsang Rampa" (one Cyril Hoskin). In explaining the doctrines of the *Vajrayana*, some of them arcane, Pallis was aided by the peerless metaphysical works of the great perennialists—René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon. These enabled him to discern the universal significance of beliefs and practices which, at first glance, seemed

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strange and alien to untutored Western eyes. (Among Pallis' many other achievements were fine translations of works by both Guénon and Schuon.)

Pallis was not a prodigious writer. His essential *oeuvre* comprises three books: the present volume, first published in 1960, the more widely-known *Peaks and Lamas* (1939), and *A Buddhist Spectrum* (1980). *Peaks and Lamas*, recounting Pallis' early sojourns in Western Tibet and the Himalayan kingdoms, is a captivating work and one of the most distinguished works of the genre. *A Buddhist Spectrum* gathers together several essays from his later years, irradiated by a gentle but clear-eyed wisdom that was the fruit of his long years of study, spiritual practice, and first-hand experience. In reviewing *A Buddhist Spectrum* Huston Smith remarked, "For insight, and the beauty insight requires if it is to be effective, I find no writer on Buddhism surpassing him." This was high praise indeed from the doyen of contemporary comparative religionists, but amply justified. These are indeed works to cherish. But, assuredly, Pallis' master work is *The Way and the Mountain*, focusing on the Tibetan tradition but situating it in the wider context of the perennial wisdom and the spiritual life which it entails. Pallis had no interest in research for its own sake, nor in any purely theoretical understanding of doctrine: his work was always attuned to the demands of the spiritual life itself. The essays to be found within these covers should be of interest not only to those on the Buddhist path but to all spiritual wayfarers.

There have been other Westerners whose writings are, to varying degrees, marked by acute metaphysical discernment, wide-ranging erudition, imaginative sympathy, and a heartfelt love for Tibet and its people, although none have so pre-eminently combined these qualities as Pallis. One might mention not only Frithjof Schuon, whose few essays on Tibetan subjects are worth more than many shelves of orientalist studies, but figures such as Giuseppi Tucci, Lama Anagarika Govinda (formerly Ernst Hoffman), Hugh Richardson, David

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Snellgrove, and Arnaud Desjardins. Nor should we forget the path-breaking labors of pioneers such as W.Y. Evans-Wentz and the redoubtable Alexandra David-Neel, or indeed of the first Tibetologists, those intrepid Jesuit scholars of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Then, too, there are the burgeoning works and teachings of the Tibetan diaspora, not least from the Dalai Lama himself, which keep alive at least some aspects of the tradition. But Marco Pallis, visiting Tibet at a fateful moment in its history, and gifted with a rare metaphysical intelligence, had a singular role to play, testifying to the deepest significance of Tibet and its fate for the dark times in which we live. His works poignantly recall the beautiful and priceless treasures which have been so shamelessly destroyed. However, *The Way and the Mountain* is far more than an elegy; it is also an affirmation of that inviolable Spirit which cannot be destroyed.

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*Foreword to The Way and the Mountain* by Harry  
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*Features in*

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