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A Single Unified Science

Philip Sherrard

The fall may best be understood not as a moral deviation or as a descent into a carnal state, but as a drama of knowledge, as a dislocation and degradation of our consciousness, a lapse of our perceptive and cognitive powers—a lapse which cuts us off from the presence and awareness of other superior worlds and imprisons us in the fatality of our solitary existence in this world. It is to forget the symbolic function of every form and to see in things not their dual, symbiotic reality, but simply their non-spiritual dimension, their psycho-physical or material appearance.

Seen in this perspective, our crime, like that of Adam, is equivalent to losing this sense of symbols; for to lose the sense of symbols is to be put in the presence of our own darkness, of our own ignorance. This is the exile from Paradise, the condition of our fallen humanity; and it is the consequence of our ambition to establish our presence exclusively in this terrestrial world and to assert that our presence in this world, and exclusively in this world, accords with our real nature as human beings. In fact, we have reached the point not only of thinking that the world which we perceive with our ego-consciousness is the natural world, but also of thinking that our fallen, sub-human state is the natural human state, the state that accords

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Philip Sherrard (1922-95) was an Orthodox theologian, spiritual writer, and co-translator of the *Philokalia*. His works include *The Sacred in Life and Art*; *The Eclipse of Man and Nature*; *Human Image, World Image*; and—his last book and the source of this passage—*Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition.*

with our nature as human beings. And we talk of acquiring knowledge of the natural world when we do not even know what goes on in the mind of an acorn.

This dislocation of our consciousness which defines the fall is perhaps most clearly evident in the divorce we make between the spiritual and the material, the esoteric and the exoteric, the uncreated and the created, and in our assumption that we can know the one without knowing the other. If we acknowledge the spiritual realm at all, we tend to regard it as something quite other than the material realm and to deny that the Divine is inalienably present in natural forms or can be known except through a direct perception which bypasses the natural world—as though the existence of this world were, spiritually speaking, negative and of no consequence where our salvation is concerned.

This other-worldly type of esotericism only too often degenerates into a kind of spiritual debauchery, in the sense that it has its counterpart in the idea that it is possible to cultivate the inner spiritual life, and to engage in meditation, invocation, and other ritual practices, whether consecrated or counterfeit, while our outward life, professional or private, is lived in obedience to mental and physical standards and habits that not only have nothing spiritual about them but are completely out of harmony with the essential rhythms of being: Divine, human, and natural. We should never forget that an authentic spiritual life can be lived only on condition, first, that the way in which we represent to ourselves the physical universe, as well as our own place in it, accords with the harmony instilled into its whole structure through the Divine *fiat* which brings it into, and sustains it in, existence; and second, that insofar as is humanly possible, we conform every aspect of our life—mental, emotional, and physical—to this harmony, disengaging therefore from all activity and practice which patently clash with it. If we offend against the essential rhythms of being, then our aspirations to tap the wellspring of our spiritual life are condemned to fruitlessness, or in some cases may even lead to a state of psychic disequilibrium that can, in truth, be described as demonic.

The divorce between the spiritual and the material means that material forms are regarded as totally non-spiritual, and thus either as illusion or as only to be known through identifying their reality with their purely material aspects. Such a debasement of the physical dimension of things is tantamount not only to denying the spiritual reality of our own created existence, but also, through depriving natural things of their theophanic function, to treating a Divine revelation as a dead and soulless body. And in this case it is not only of a kind of suicide that we are speaking; we are also speaking of a kind of murder.

It is just as dangerous to think we can attain a knowledge of God while ignoring, or even denying, His presence in existing things and in their corresponding symbolic rituals as it is for us to think that we can attain a knowledge of existing things while ignoring, or even denying, the Divine presence that informs them and gives them their reality. In effect, there cannot be a knowledge of the outward appearance of things—of what we call phenomena—without a knowledge of their inner reality; just as there cannot be a knowledge of this inner reality which does not include a knowledge of the outer appearance. It is the same as with the Holy Book: the integrality of the revelation cannot be understood simply from its letter, from its outward literal sense; it can be understood only when interpreted by the spiritual science of its inner meaning. At the same time this inner meaning cannot be perceived except by means of the letter, of the outward literal sense. There is an unbreakable union between the esoteric and the exoteric, the feminine and the masculine, between the inner reality of a thing and its external appearance. And any genuine knowledge of either depends upon both being regarded as integers of a single unified science.

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