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5. RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF THE PERENNIALIST SCHOOL

If one wished to sum up in one word the central evil of the modern age, one could do so with the word "atheism". While this diagnosis might command ready agreement on the part of religiously-minded people, it might still, because it seems too abstract or too general, be regarded as a trifle facile. Nevertheless, I believe that, in one or more of its many guises, it is precisely atheism that is at the root of all modern evils. Atheism may be as ancient as fallen man, but the atheism that is with us today has its direct origin in the ideas of the 18th century "Enlightenment"—the ideas espoused by Voltaire, Rousseau, and the *encylopédistes*.

Of course, I use the term "atheism" in an extremely comprehensive way, and I include in it things not usually perceived as being directly atheistic, such as illogic, unimaginativeness, indifference, and complacency—all so many denials of God (and thus so many abdications of humanity) without which such absurd but successful hoaxes as evolutionism, psychologism, and marxism would never have been possible.

In the 20th century, the most explicit and brutal form of atheism was Soviet communism. A few years ago, after seventy years of pretense and pretension during which it enjoyed the enthusiastic approval of "enlightened" academia—it foundered in a really big way. Needless to say, the evil and the ignorance that took concrete form in communism have not simply evaporated. They cannot but find other forms of expression.

When something is perceived as bad, there are usually reactions to it, and these in turn can be either good or bad. There was the reaction to worldliness of St. Francis of Assisi, a "second Christ" (*alter Christus*) who, through the strength of his faith and his asceticism, reanimated and reinvigorated the Christian tradition for centuries to come. One could perhaps think of other renewals of this kind, but such reactions to the bad are rare indeed. Nowadays, most reactions to what is perceived as evil are themselves evil: they are reactions, not *par en haut* ("by the upward path"), but *par en bas* ("by the downward path"). It is as if the devil took charge of the reactions against his own work—and used them to his further advantage.

Examples of bad reactions to atheism or secularism are not hard to find. In keeping with the age we live in, they are invariably forms of collectivism of one sort or another. Collectivism means the generation of quantitative power from below. Its opposite is spontaneous submission to qualitative power from above. This latter involves individual responsibility and the ability to recognize legitimate authority. In the past, people *submitted* to the self-evident truths of religion; today they espouse, in mass movements, the *outward trappings* of religion. Khomeinîism and Qadhâfiism are cases in point. So are Serbian and Hindu and many other contemporary nationalisms. This form of collectivism may be called "denominationalism".

Like other collectivisms, denominationalism is anything but eirenic; it is the direct source of a viciously aggressive competitiveness between religious and cultural communities, which is properly known as "communalism"—a term that was first used in this sense in India. Communalism, in the form of inter-religious conflict, has today become a world-wide epidemic. But do we know its exact nature? It is the rivalry, to the death, of two neighboring *religious* nationalisms. We are witnesses to the war between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, and to the war between Roman Catholic Croats and Eastern Orthodox Serbs. (Each of these rival ethnicities has contributed cruelly to the tragic destruction of largely Muslim Bosnia, and particularly the historic cities of Sarajevo and Mostar). In Sri Lanka the communal rivalry is between Buddhists and Hindus, in the Panjab between Hindus and Sikhs, in Ayodhyâ and elsewhere in India it is between Muslims and Hindus, in Cyprus between Greeks and Turks, and in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. Each grouping adheres to its denomination and its culture in a passionate but nevertheless superficial and formalistic way, and in a manner which lethally challenges a neighboring and equally superficial and formalistic cultural loyalty. These groupings are often called fundamentalist, but in their ideology they are invariably modern, progressivist, and collectivist. Communalism has been well described as "collective egoism". The last thing that one expects to find in these fanatical groupings is spirituality or piety. Not the Inward, but the outward in its most brutal and superficial mode, is their concern. They defend the form while killing the essence; they will kill for the husk, while trampling on the life-giving kernel. They kill not only their putative religious rival: they have already killed themselves. Communalism, like all shallow—but consuming—passion, is suicidal.

It might be said that one can find a prefiguration of communalism in the "holy wars" of ages past—the Crusades, for example—in which two traditional systems were pitted against one another, each one viewing the other as the representative of evil. It is a far cry, however, from the holy wars, chivalric or otherwise, of the Middle Ages to the mindless hatreds and mechanized exterminations of modern times.

There is no doubt, however, that the seismic "crack" or "fault" which runs through former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe does have its origin in an ancient division, namely, the "Great Schism" of A.D. 1054.[1] It is the dividing line between Eastern and Western Christendom. I doubt if there is any more bitterly-manned frontier in the whole world. This is a chilling reminder in the contemporary Western climate of facile and superficial ecumenism.

In view of the ancient origin of most of the present-day communal divisions, it could perhaps be objected that communalism is no more than the instinct of self-preservation, and that, as such, it is as old as mankind. However, this is far from being the case. For very many centuries, the world was divided into great empires, each comprising a variety of peoples and often a variety of religions. The Anglo-Greek traveler and author Marco Pallis once made mention of an 18th century Tibetan book which (from the standpoint of Tibet) referred to the four great empires, which to them seemed to encompass the world: the Chinese, the Mughal, the Russian, and the Roman. By this last term they meant Christendom or Europe.

It was at the end of World War I that several empires that had encompassed many different peoples and religions crumbled: the Prussian, the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman. Many new countries appeared: Poland, Czechoslovakia (now Czechia and Slovakia), Yugoslavia (now broken into seven parts), amongst others. Also several independent Arab countries emerged from the Ottoman Turkish empire. All this required an "ideological" basis, and this was found in 1918 in the "Fourteen Points" of President Woodrow Wilson, one of which was "self-determination", the first time these fateful words achieved prominence. The idea may have been well-intentioned—a safeguard against putative imperial oppression—but it has since become a dogma of the modern world and of the United Nations, and

[1] The essential cause of the schism was the theological dispute regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Eastern Church adhered to the original form of the early creeds which declared that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father; the Western Church, on the other hand, introduced the doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and from the Son* (in Latin, *Filioque*).

is the "philosophical" justification of almost all current communalism and ethnic conflict. To paraphrase the words of the late Professor John Lodge, often quoted by Ananda Coomaraswamy: from the four great empires known to the Tibetans to the present-day "United Nations", *quelle dégringolade*!

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Let us leave communalism for a moment, and turn to a very different phenomenon of our times. This is what the American Academy of Religion has called "the perennialist or esoterist school", of which the founders were the French philosopher and orientalist René Guénon (1886-1951) and the German philosopher and poet Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), and which was further expounded by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984). This is discussed in full in a later chapter entitled "Frithjof Schuon and the Perennialist School", but we may note here that its principal characteristics include the fundamental and essential principles of metaphysics (with its cosmological and anthropological ramifications), intellectual intuition, orthodoxy, tradition, universality, the science of symbolism; spirituality in the broadest sense; intrinsic morals and esthetics; and the meaning and importance of sacred art. A very important characteristic is a deep-reaching critique of the modern world, on the basis of strictly traditional principles. Above all, like Pythagoras and Plato, Guénon and Schuon derive their doctrinal expositions directly from *intellectus purus*—a process which lends to these expositions an unsurpassable lucidity, not to say infallibility.

This supra-formal truth constitutes the *religio perennis*. This term, which does not imply a rejection of the similar terms *philosophia perennis* and *sophia perennis*, nevertheless contains a hint of an additional dimension which is unfailingly present in Schuon's writings. This is that intellectual understanding entails a spiritual responsibility, that intelligence requires to be complemented by sincerity and faith, and that "seeing" (in height) implies "believing" (in depth). In other words, the greater our perception of essential and saving truth, the greater our obligation towards an effort of inward or spiritual "realization".

I have called this perennialist current of intellectuality and spirituality "a phenomenon of our times"—but unlike other phenomena of today, it is a secret one, a "still small voice", a hidden presence, sought

out and found only by those with a hunger and thirst for it, and known only to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

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Returning to communalism: at the outward level, this is sometimes addressed in a desultory and piece-meal way by what is called "the international community". And of course, the United States has become embroiled in a war that is linked with this question. Inevitably, the response to such efforts is highly uneven—experience has shown that there is no one who can effectively "police" the entire world. Such sympathy as is extended to victims is on a humanitarian basis towards individuals. It does not comprehend or consider the value of communities, collectivities, or what we might call "traditional civilizations", be these ethnic or religious, and it is they which are at risk. It is precisely such religious communities—be they Tibetan Buddhists or Bosnian Muslims—that are in danger of being destroyed by a powerful (and sinisterly "idealistic") neighbor—something much less likely to happen when they were part of a large, but tolerant (because "realistic") empire. The Austro-Hungarian empire encompassed, ethnically speaking, Germans, Magyars, and Slavs and, religiously speaking, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam. I have myself visited many mosques in Bosnia, and in several of them I saw magnificent Persian prayer carpets donated by the Emperor Franz Josef. This is a courtesy unlikely to be extended to the Slavic Muslims by the competing religious nationalism of their neighbors, whose sentiments, on the contrary, have shown themselves to be exterminatory! Both Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt have mentioned in their writings that kings and nobles often had a wisdom and a tolerance unknown in a denominationally-motivated clergy—today it would be known as an ideologically-motivated political élite—who unfortunately have it in their power to influence the people along denominationalist, or inanely ideological, lines. A similar point was made by Dante, who, for intellectual and spiritual reasons, sided with the Emperor, and not the Pope.

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Communalism derives from denominationalism. Communalism is obviously outward; denominationalism, being an attitude of mind, could perhaps be described as "falsely inward". There is virtually nothing that we as individuals can do outwardly about communalism; but we can always keep under review our attitudes towards our own denomination, and be on guard against any slipping into what I have called "denominationalism" (which the French call "confessionalism"). We must not, even within ourselves, give comfort to communalism by consciously or unconsciously participating in the denominationalism that makes it possible.

As I have mentioned, the traditionalist writings are largely an exposition of the *religio perennis*, the "underlying religion" of essential truth and saving grace which is at the heart of each great revelation (and of which each great revelation is the providential "clothing" for a particular sector of humanity). Because of this relationship between the "underlying religion" and its various "providential clothings", it is necessary for anyone wishing access to this "underlying religion" to do so by espousing one particular traditional and orthodox religion, to believe and understand its central theses (its "dogmas"), and to participate in its way of sanctification (its "sacraments"). The universalism of the perennialist does not mean dispensing with sacred forms that were revealed by God for our salvation. There is no other way than through these. The perennialist is simply aware that the Formless must needs be represented on earth by a plurality of forms. The contrary is an impossibility.

To return to the *philosophia perennis* or *religio perennis*: one finds two types of people attracted to it. There are those who are already say, Catholics or Muslims, and who find that the insights of the *religio perennis* produce a deepening and an essentialization of their pre-existing faith; and there are those—possibly products of the post-religious modern world—who have discovered and been conquered by the *religio perennis*, and who as a result embrace, say, Catholicism or Islam in order sincerely to live, actualize, or realize, the truth or the truths that they have discovered. The first group are Catholics or Muslims first and *religio perennis* second; the second group are *religio perennis* first and Catholics or Muslims second. Those in the first category already possessed something of value, something sacred; as a result, they may hesitate to embrace fully all the theses of the *religio perennis*. Those in the second category, on the other hand, owe everything to the *religio perennis*; absolutely nothing else could have awakened them to the sacred and distanced them from the illusions

of the modern world; as a result, they may hesitate to embrace fully all the secondary demands of the denomination they have adopted, especially those of a communal or partisan nature.

These two positions are to some extent extremes; there are many positions that lie between them. Also, the two positions are not necessarily unchanging. Sometimes a person, who has come to Christianity through the *religio perennis*, slips into the life of his denomination, and "metaphysics", "universalism", etc., cease to be in the forefront of his spiritual life. Sometimes, on the other hand, a person who has been a "denominationalist", suddenly or gradually sees the full meaning of the *religio perennis*, is overwhelmed by its luminosity, crystallinity, and celestiality, and henceforth his sacramental and prayer life is governed, so to speak, by it alone. When all is said and done, however, one has to say that the two approaches do remain distinct, and each has its own characteristics and consequences.

Let me say here a word of criticism regarding the Vatican II Council of 1960-1965. It is not necessary to be a perennialist in order to condemn the official Roman Church of today; it is sufficient simply to know the traditional Catholic catechism. The discrepancy between the two is striking. The perennialist sympathizes with the most exoteric of Roman Catholics, provided he be orthodox. But he himself is not a Roman Catholic exoterist. The Catholic exoterist dreams of the "Catholicism of the nineteen-thirties", he gives his allegiance to a denomination, to a form. In so doing, he has much justification, for Catholicism in its historic, outward form endured to beyond the middle of the 20th century. There have been many important and remarkable saints in recent times: in the 19th century, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Jean-Baptiste Vianney (the Curé d'Ars), St Bernadette of Lourdes and, in the 20th century, St. Maria Goretti.

Nevertheless, in spite of this unbroken tradition of dogma, sacrament, and sanctity, it is important to be aware that the Catholic Church of the nineteen-thirties had long since incorporated within itself many fatal flaws, all deriving ultimately from its suicidal espousal of the vainglory of the Renaissance. The irruption of Protestantism is usually seen as a reaction against the sale of indulgences and other abuses, but it could also be said that Luther, who loved St. Paul and St. Augustine, was in his fashion a man of the Middle Ages who rebelled against the illogicality and treason of the Renaissance. The Reformation did not kill Catholicism; in fact it provoked the Council of Trent at which the Catholic Church went as far as it could towards putting its house in order, thus enabling it to maintain its witness for sev-

eral more centuries. The death blow to the official Catholic Church was delivered only in the 20th century by Teilhard de Chardin and "Vatican II".

Such strong criticism of the present-day Catholic Church may come as a surprise to readers; but the situation was unquestionably foreseen by the last traditional Pope, Pius XII, when he said that the day was coming soon when the faithful would only be able to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the mass on the secret altar of the heart. Many thought that he was referring to the threat of outward persecution, but it could equally well be maintained that his words applied to the impending arrival of a falsified church and a falsified liturgy. Be that as it may, the perennialist or esoterist owes allegiance, not to a form as such, but only to the Holy Spirit, only to the supra-formal Truth. He knows the meaning of forms; he respectfully and humbly participates in sacred forms revealed to vehicle his salvation; but he knows that forms are but messengers of the Formless, and that the Formless or Supra-formal, of necessity, possesses on earth more than one system of forms. The extrinsic reason for this plurality is the great ethnic and psychological divisions of mankind. The intrinsic reason is that the Supra-formal is inexhaustible, and each successive revelation, in its outward form, manifests a fresh aspect thereof. In its outward form, I say, because each revelation, in its inward essence, does give access to, and does confer the grace of, the Formless. That is why each one saves. This reality is what Schuon has called the supra-formal, or transcendent, unity of the religions.

It has been emphasized that universalism does not imply the rejection of forms. Does it imply syncretism? The answer is "No". The doctrine of the transcendent or esoteric unity of the religions is not a syncretism, but a synthesis. What does this mean? It means that we must *believe* in all orthodox, traditional religions, but we can *practice* only one. Consider the metaphor of climbing a mountain. Climbers can start from different positions at the foot of the mountain. From these positions, they must follow the particular path that will lead them to the top. We can and must believe in the efficacy of all the paths, but our legs are not long enough to enable us to put our feet on two paths at once! Nevertheless, the other paths can be of some help to us. For example, if we notice that someone on a neighboring path has a particularly skillful way of circumventing a boulder, it may be that we can use the same skill to negotiate such boulders as may lie ahead of us on our own path. The paths as such, however, meet only at the summit. The religions are one only in God.

Perhaps I could say in passing that, while it is a grave matter to change one's religion, the mountain-climbing metaphor nevertheless illustrates what takes place when one does. One moves horizontally across the mountain and joins an alternative path, and at that point one starts climbing again. One does not have to go back to the foot of the mountain and start again from there.

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In this chapter, I have moved back and forward between the *religio perennis* and the current world-wide epidemic of ethnic and religious strife known as communalism. I have done so because both are significant phenomena of our time. The one is only too outward; the other is inward and in a sense hidden. As regards the apparently intractable communal rivalries, there is little outwardly that we as individuals can do. Inwardly, however, we can help in two ways, firstly by our prayers, and secondly—and as a function of our prayer—by deepening our understanding of the relationship between forms and the Formless, and of the relationship which, ideally, should exist between the several forms themselves. Each revealed belief system (with its corresponding way of worship) is a particular manifestation of the *religio perennis*. It is therefore no mistake to regard any one revelation as *the* revelation, as long as one is not "nationalistic" or "competitive" about it. In practice, however, it can be a difficult matter. How can one, at one moment, enjoin people to be committed "traditional" Christians, and then, the next moment, speak with equal respect of the religions of Krishna, Buddha, or Mohammed? Difficult indeed. But, in some way, it has to be done.

The basic cultural distinction made by the post-Christian world is still between Christendom and all the rest, but this is simply not a good enough analysis for the present age. The distinction that we have to make today is between believers and non-believers, between the "good" and the "bad"—irrespective of their revealed form. In so doing we need not be afraid of being called "judgemental"! Our daily experience shows us that there is none so judgemental as the secular humanist. He judges everything. The trouble is: he judges wrongly—with devastating effects for the community and the nation.

"Judge not that ye be not judged." This is a text that is too easily misinterpreted. It applies to our egoism, our subjectivism, our self-interest; it does not preclude the divine gift of objectivity, still less

does it abolish truth. There is manifestly plenty for us to "judge"—and oppose: atheism, agnosticism, and everything that flows from the "Enlightenment" and the French Revolution. We passively tolerate so much that comes from satan ("rock" music, fashionable "-isms", sacrilegious entertainments, blasphemous art) and yet we think our culture is threatened if someone wears a form of dress or speaks a language different from our own. We must be sufficiently alert to discriminate between what comes from God (no matter how exotic its outward form) and what does not (no matter how familiar).

Our judgements must be totally divorced from denomination. We must be able to oppose the "bad" (even though they be of our own religion), and acclaim the "good" (even though they belong to a strange religion). This injunction may sound platitudinous, but almost no one follows it instinctively. 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;* in these latter days, we underestimate the "other religions" at our peril. Alas, very few (be they Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or anything else) are able to make this angelic leap of faith—for many bad reasons, as well as for one good reason, namely that each religion has within it a verse corresponding to "No man cometh to the Father but by Me". Each religion is an expression of the Absolute—the Logos—otherwise it would not be a religion, but a man-made ideology, with no power to save.

It is precisely this "absolute" in each religion that makes it a religion, but it is difficult for most people to realize the *simple* truth that the Absolute, being by definition supra-formal, must needs—within the formal world—espouse many forms. It cannot be otherwise, despite the providentially "absolutist" text within each religion. To understand this truth, at least theoretically, is the *first* necessity in the present age. But unfortunately, like so many good things, this area has been partially taken over by the devil, in the shape of the cults, the "new age" movement, etc. One might say that it is in this area above all that the teachings and elucidations of the perennialists have an indispensable role to play.

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In The Light Of The Writings Of The Perennialist School

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