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INTRODUCTION

The essays compiled in this anthology are intended to provide an accessible introduction to the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" school of comparative religious thought. This current of thought, which saw the light of day in the early twentieth century in the pioneering writings of the French metaphysician and symbologist René Guénon (1886-1951), and which was amplified by the prodigious scholarship of the Anglo-Ceylonese orientalist and art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), received its fullest exposition in the writings of the German-Swiss metaphysician, painter, and poet, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998).[1] In the pages that follow, the reader will encounter the penetrating writings of these major authors, as well as many other prominent "perennialist" writers such as Titus Burckhardt,[2] Lord Northbourne, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings (co-editor of this volume), Whitall Perry, William Stoddart, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. What we intend to offer now is a broad outline of the essential features of the perennial philosophy in the hope of providing the reader with a clear compass and sure orientation in approaching both the arrangement and the content of the essays here included.

The perspective of the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" school of thought has variously been called the *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy), *sophia perennis* (perennial wisdom), or *religio perennis* (perennial religion). These terms, which are essentially identical, each

[1] See Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000) for an excellent introduction to the "perennialist" perspective.

[2] Frithjof Schuon also acknowledged the importance of the writings of the German-Swiss art historian and orientalist Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) in saying that the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" school had two "originators" (Guénon and Schuon) and two "continuators" (Coomaraswamy and Burckhardt). If this view ostensibly clashes with chronology it should be recalled that Coomaraswamy's mature and properly "perennialist" writings only began at around 1935, whereas Guénon's works began to appear in 1921 and Schuon's in 1933 (William Stoddart, "Four Spokesman of the Perennialist or Traditionalist Current of Intellectuality and Spirituality," unpublished). The "originality" of Schuon is especially evident—apart from his masterful exposition of integral metaphysics—in his treatment of art, beauty, prayer, and virtue, subjects on which Guénon did not touch. The works of Schuon are drawn on extensively in this introduction.

contain a distinctive nuance or accentuation. For instance, the term *sophia* is to be preferred to *philosophia* when "philosophy" is understood in its purely modern sense of "rationalist or skeptical thought" and not, as its etymology and ancient practice suggests, the "love of wisdom." Similarly, the term *religio* is to be preferred to *sophia* or *philosophia* when it is necessary to emphasize that it is not only intellectual doctrine or belief that constitutes "wisdom" or the "love of wisdom," but, in addition, the methodical or ritual practices that religion provides in order to effectively realize that wisdom. It must be acknowledged, however, that "perennial philosophy" has proved the most popular of the three terms, and it will therefore be employed most frequently in what follows.

What then is the perennial philosophy? It is both absolute Truth and infinite Presence. As absolute Truth it is the perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis*) that stands as the transcendent source of all the intrinsically orthodox religions of humankind. In the words of St. Augustine, it is that "uncreated Wisdom, the same now, as before, and the same to be for evermore" (*Confessions*, 9:10). As infinite Presence it is the perennial religion (*religio perennis*) that lives within the heart of all intrinsically orthodox religions. In the words of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa: "There is . . . one sole religion and one sole worship for all beings endowed with understanding, and this is presupposed through a variety of rites" (*De Pace Fidei*, 6).

Now it is precisely this "sole religion" that Frithjof Schuon has called the "underlying religion"[3] or "religion of the heart" (*religio cordis*), which is the heart of all religion.[4] It should be clearly understood, however, that the "underlying religion" is of an essentially supra-formal, universal, or spiritual nature. Although it resides as an immanent and underlying presence within the religions, it is not itself a formal or particular religion (as are the various religions of humankind, e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and the Native American religion of the Sun Dance and the Sacred Pipe). In other words, the "underlying religion" remains tran-

[3] See Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (London: Perennial Books, 1965), p. 143 and *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1985), p. 138. Schuon was also the author of a private, unpublished text called "The Underlying Religion."

[4] This is an adaptation of William Stoddart's saying, "Mysticism is the heart of religion and the religion of the heart" ("Quotations: A Personal Collection," unpublished), itself a paraphrase from Goethe.

scendent vis-à-vis the religions, even while being a vivifying presence within them. It is in no way a "new religion."

The perennial philosophy thus has a transcendent dimension, and this is absolute Truth or Wisdom, and an immanent dimension, and this is infinite Presence or Union, the first aspect referring to the intelligence and the second to the will. As Frithjof Schuon notes:

> The essential function of human intelligence is discernment between the Real and the illusory or between the Permanent and the impermanent, and the essential function of the will is attachment to the Permanent or the Real. This discernment and this attachment are the quintessence of all spirituality; carried to their highest level or reduced to their purest substance, they constitute the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or what may be called the *religio perennis*.[5]

These specifications allow for an initial definition of the perennial philosophy as: (1) metaphysical discernment between the Real and the unreal, or the Absolute and the relative (i.e. the aspect of Truth or metaphysics); and (2) mystical concentration on the Real (i.e. the aspect of Presence or unitive prayer).[6] This twofold definition also contains "the criteria of intrinsic orthodoxy for every religion and all spirituality":

> In order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction in question, and it must provide a path that guarantees both the perfection of concentration and its continuity; in other words a religion is orthodox if it provides a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the Absolute and the relative, and thus of their reciprocal relationships, and a spiritual activity that is contemplative in its nature and effectual with regard to our ultimate destiny.[7]

It might be wondered, though, if the heart of religion can indeed be reduced to the simple polarity "discernment-concentration." Are

[5] Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 119-120.

[6] See Patrick Laude (ed.), *Pray without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006) for a wide selection of writings dealing with prayer, particularly of the quintessential or invocatory kind.

[7] Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 121.

there not a multitude of differences between the religions and is it not contrary to truth to overlook these same differences? Or again, are the religions not being placed in a strait-jacket—one that takes no account of their unique spiritual contours—in order to make them conform to a putative definition of the heart of religion? Let us quote at length a passage from Frithjof Schuon dealing with the perennial philosophy—in this case speaking on Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism—keeping in mind the twofold definition of the perennial philosophy mentioned above:

> In Christianity—according to Saint Irenaeus and others—God "became man" that man might "become God"; in Hindu terms one would say: *Ātmā* became *Māyā* that *Māyā* might become *Ātmā*. In Christianity, contemplative and unifying concentration is to dwell in the manifested Real—the "Word made flesh"—in order that this Real might dwell in us, who are illusory, according to what Christ said in a vision granted to Saint Catherine of Siena: "I am He who is; thou art she who is not." The soul dwells in the Real—in the kingdom of God that is "within us"—by means of permanent prayer of the heart, as is taught by the parable of the unjust judge and the injunction of Saint Paul.[8]
>
> In Islam . . . discernment between the Real and the non-real is affirmed by the Testimony of Unity (the *Shahādah*):[9] the correlative concentration on the Symbol or permanent consciousness of the Real is effected by this same Testimony or by the divine Name [*Allāh*] which synthesizes it and which is thus the quintessential crystallization of the Koranic Revelation. . . . The Real "descended" (*nazzala*, *unzila*); it entered into the non-real or illusory, the "perishable" (*fānin*), in becoming the Koran—or the *Shahādah* that summarizes it, or the *Ism* (the "Name") that is its sonorous and graphic essence, or the *Dhikr* (the "Mention") that is its operative synthesis—in order that upon this divine barque the illusory might return to the Real. . . . In this reciprocity lies all the mystery of the "Night of Destiny" (*Laylat al-Qadr*), which is a "descent," and of

[8] Editor's Note: The parable of the unjust judge (Luke, 18:1-8) begins: "And he [Christ] spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." The well-known injunction of St. Paul is: "Pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians, 5:17). These verses form the basis of the method of ejaculatory prayer in Eastern Christianity, also known as the Jesus Prayer.

[9] Editor's Note: The Islamic Testimony of Unity is: "There is no god but God" (*Lā ilāha illa' Llāh*), which enunciates the fundamental discernment between the Absolute and the relative, or (less rigorously) between God and the world.

> the "Night of Ascension" (*Laylat al-Mi'rāj*), which is the complementary phase. . . .
>
> In Buddhism the two terms of the alternative or of discernment are *Nirvāna*, the Real, and *Samsāra*, the illusory; in the last analysis the path is the permanent consciousness of *Nirvāna* as *Shūnya*, the "Void," or else it is concentration on the saving manifestation of *Nirvāna*, the Buddha, who is *Shūnyamūrti*, "Manifestation of the Void." In the Buddha—notably in his form Amitabha—*Nirvāna* became *Samsāra* that *Samsāra* might become *Nirvāna;* and if *Nirvāna* is the Real and *Samsāra* is illusion, the Buddha is the Real in the illusory. . . . The passage from the illusory to the Real is described in the *Prajnāpāramitā-hridaya-sūtra* in these terms: "Gone, gone—gone for the other shore, attained the other shore, O Enlightenment, be blessed!"[10]

For those with "eyes to see" the reading of this passage will unveil a very satisfying dimension of "transcendent unity."[11] Moreover, it will be understood that this unity transcends the differences between the religions without in any way denying those same differences on their own level. Unity is not uniformity just as synthesis is not syncretism. Thus, Christianity is very clearly different from Islam or Buddhism *qua* form; but it is one with them *qua* essence (or *qua* perennial philosophy). Readers should consult Section V ("The Perennial Philosophy") for a more detailed exposition of the "transcendent unity of the religions." This crucial section provides both a synthesis and a summation of the whole book. Doctrine (metaphysical discernment) and method (unitive concentration) are dealt with more fully in Section III ("Metaphysics") and Section VII ("Prayer and Virtue") respectively. Readers should also note that Section II ("Traditional Cosmology and Modern Science") carries the dimension of discernment into the cosmological realm where a thorough critique of modern scientism—and particularly transformist evolution—is presented, while in Section IV

[10] Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, pp. 122-124. In Hinduism, this twofold definition of the perennial philosophy is most succinctly expressed in the Vedantic maxim: "Brahman is Reality; the world is appearance; the soul is not other than Brahman."

[11] See Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, Ill: Quest, 1993) for a foundational elucidation of this key "perennialist" idea. See also Whitall Perry's monumental *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), which presents a vast array of sayings from the world's religions to illustrate the idea of "transcendent unity."

("Symbolism") the age-old science of symbolism and the doctrine of the multiple degrees of Reality is reaffirmed.

If metaphysical discernment refers to the Truth, and unitive concentration to the Way, what then of virtue, which pertains to the spiritual Life? Do not doctrine and method, discernment and union, suffice unto themselves? Assuredly not, for as Frithjof Schuon says,

> Spiritual realization [i.e. method] imposes on the soul an immense disproportion owing to the fact that it introduces the presence of the sacred into the darkness of human imperfection; this inevitably provokes disequilibrium-producing reactions which in principle carry with them the risk of an irremediable fall, reactions which moral beauty, together with the graces which by its very nature it attracts, can largely prevent or attenuate. It is precisely this beauty that ambitious dilettantes without imagination believe they can disdain.[12]

Without conformity of the soul to the Real—through virtue—the spiritual life risks becoming merely a mental play of the mind or a technical effort of the will. For the integral human being is comprised of an intelligence, a will, *and* a soul (or sentiment):[13] while the Truth requires the deployment of the intelligence ("with all thy mind"), and the Way (or Prayer) requires the activity of the will ("with all thy strength"), the Life (or Virtue) requires conformity of the sentiment ("with all thy soul").[14] In the spiritual life the fundamental virtues are: humility, or the effacement of the ego; charity, or the giving of oneself to others; and veracity, or pure objectivity. These correspond respectively to the fundamental spiritual stages of purification, perfection, and union. The above twofold definition of the perennial philosophy (i.e. discernment-concentration) can thus be expanded to include three pillars: Truth, Way (or Prayer), and Virtue (or Life). The first part of Section VII ("Prayer and Virtue") deals with this subject in more detail, making a clear distinction between intrinsic virtue and social morality.

[12] Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Pates Manor, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981), p. 111.

[13] See Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, pp. 93-100.

[14] "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark, 12:30).

Beauty—which will now be considered as the fourth pillar of the perennial philosophy—is a support of incalculable value in the spiritual life; far from being a mere "sensible consolation" or an expendable luxury, it has on the contrary the fundamental role of being, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, an "exteriorization with a view to an interiorization." Now this message of interiorization "is both intellectual and moral: intellectual because it communicates to us, in the world of accidentality, aspects of [divine] Substance, without for all that having to address itself to abstract thought; and moral, because it reminds us of what we must love, and consequently be."[15] As the "splendor of the truth," Beauty provides the intellective soul with the occasional cause for a Platonic "recollection"—i.e. an objective "vision"—of the heavenly archetypes; and as "external goodness," Beauty provides the contemplative soul with an existential—and not merely mental or conceptual—reminder of its original nature of primordial perfection (i.e. its pure state of virtue before the fall).[16] Among the most direct manifestations of Beauty and its message of interiorization are firstly virgin nature,[17] then sacred art,[18] and lastly holy company; as "'exteriorizations of the Inward' they encourage the 'interiorization of the outward.'"[19] But Beauty must also reverberate in our immediate environment: in dress, comportment, and the ambience of the home, all of which should echo or evoke our heavenly homeland. Readers

[15] Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 179.

[16] It is said that the exceptional outward beauty of the Virgin Mary—she who personifies the pure and immaculate soul—was a cause, not of concupiscence, but of profound interiorization.

[17] "There is a concordance between the *religio perennis* and virgin nature and by the same token between it and primordial nudity, that of creation, birth, resurrection, or the high priest in the Holy of Holies, a hermit in the desert, a Hindu *sādhu* or *sannyāsin*, a Red Indian in silent prayer on a mountain. Nature inviolate is at once a vestige of the earthly Paradise and a prefiguration of the heavenly Paradise; sanctuaries and garments differ, but virgin nature and the human body remain faithful to the initial unity" (Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, pp. 25-26). For primordial peoples such as the Native American Indians, virgin nature is the primordial "book" of revelation; it is also the Divine art.

[18] See especially Frithjof Schuon, *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, edited by Catherine Schuon (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007) and Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art of East and West* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002) for remarkable insights into the meaning of sacred art.

[19] Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1975), p. 190.

will find a fuller elucidation of the spiritual role of Beauty in Section VI ("Beauty").

Truth, Prayer, Virtue, Beauty: these four constituent elements of the perennial philosophy must, however, be inaugurated upon the basis of a traditional Religion. Why? Because the truths conferred by the Intellect—that supra-rational faculty of transcendent knowledge within man—have been occluded since the time of the fall. And it is precisely the role of divine Revelation to remind us of these truths from the "outside," namely to "'crystallize' and 'actualize' . . . [the] nucleus of certitudes that not only abides forever in the Divine Omniscience, but also sleeps by refraction in the 'naturally supernatural' kernel of the individual [i.e. the Intellect]."[20] The religious traditions are thus the providential vehicles—because instituted by Heaven and not at the initiative of fallen man—for Truth, Prayer, Virtue, and Beauty, though of necessity they are presented in a mode suited to the particular cultural, ethnic, or linguistic community to which they are addressed. The religious traditions are thus the vehicle of a heavenly Grace which man could not possibly draw from himself. Traditional Religion thus stands as an indispensable fifth pillar of the perennial philosophy. Section I ("Tradition and Modernity") provides the reader with a detailed explanation of the necessity of traditional Religion, the role of revelation and "tradition" (which should not be confused with mere custom or habit), and the requirements of orthodox belief and practice.

A question that imposes itself at this point is: why are there multiple revelations? Does not one revelation suffice for all? Humanly speaking, it can be said that a multiplicity of revelations is necessitated by the diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic communities, as well as by the gradual degeneration of these communities over time. Metaphysically speaking, it can be said that it is the "overflowing" divine Infinitude (and *a fortiori* the divine Mercy) which calls forth multiple revelations.[21] For although Truth is one and absolute, it is "situated beyond forms, whereas Revelation, or the Tradition derived from it, belongs to the formal order . . . [and] to speak of form is to

[20] Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 119.

[21] "When righteousness is weak and faints," says Krishna, "and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises again on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world" (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 4:7-8).

speak of diversity, and thus plurality."[22] But does not the diversity of revelations also imply their relativity? In respect of their form "yes," though not in respect of their supra-formal and universal content (or essence). For by their transcendent essence religions enunciate the absolute Truth, but not in respect of their particular forms, which, *qua* forms, inevitably partake of limitation and diversity, and hence of relativity.

Nevertheless, the religious forms are providential vehicles of the transcendent essence; they are, so to speak, finite receptacles that "contain" the Infinite. They thus perform the fundamental role of communicating the Truth to man (doctrine), and of providing him with the means to assimilate its sacramental and sanctifying Presence (method). For fallen man identifies primarily with his formal nature (his body and his soul) and not with his supra-formal or transcendent nature (his spirit); he has thus to approach the Real through the hallowed forms willed by Heaven and not otherwise. In consequence, these same forms cannot simply be repudiated or dismissed in the name of a pretentious and wholly unrealistic desire to realize the "pure spirit."

In this regard it is important to distinguish the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" understanding of religious forms—which acknowledges both their relativity and their necessity—from the views of the so-called "religious pluralists" and "new age" cults. The "religious pluralists," who are much given to dialogue and are susceptible to fragmentary notions of universality, seem ever willing to compromise the forms of religion in order to further their pointedly postmodern political and sentimental agendas. They forget that the religious forms—as inalienable symbols of the essence—are dispensed with at great spiritual peril. In fact, so-called "religious pluralism" is nothing more than a "horizontal" and worldly caricature of the "vertical" and spiritual perspective of the "transcendent unity of the religions."

Even worse are the modern syncretistic cults, who, in the name of a vague ideal of "universal truth"—and influenced by anti-traditional progressivist and evolutionist ideas—proclaim a so-called "new age" of the spirit.[23] In their blind presumption they would seek to dispense

[22] Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 17.

[23] Anti-traditional exponents of a new so-called "universal truth" include: Anthroposophy, Baha'i, Aurobindo Ghose, G.I. Gurdjieff, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Rajneesh (Osho), Subud, the Theosophical Society, Vivekananda (disciple of Ramakrishna, the great Hindu saint),

with the age-old religious forms and establish a new universal "religion" (or "society"), henceforth free from all "divisive dogma" and "exclusivist formalism."[24] With an ego-flattering "self-realization" as their goal they invariably seek to develop "latent powers," which, needless to say, are of a decidedly psychic and not spiritual nature. In order to see how dangerously heterodox are the subjectivist beliefs and improvised practices of these groups, it suffices to expose the central flaw of their counterfeit spirituality: the claim—common to all false mysticisms—that would equate the fallen and unregenerate soul with the Divine.[25] To the contrary, all genuine spirituality insists on the purification and perfection of the soul, along with the grace of God, as indispensable prerequisites for union with the Divine.

Let us now leave these aberrant groups and return to the authentic perennial philosophy. An important final question remains: what is the relationship of the perennial philosopher—whose nature is irresistibly drawn to the "underlying religion" or the "religion of the heart"—to the various formal elements of the religion to which he belongs by birth? The perennial philosopher will seek to esoterize and universalize these religious forms from within, rather than bemoan their "restrictiveness" from without; for "Truth does not deny forms from the outside, but transcends them from within."[26] Thus, when Jesus proclaims in the Gospel that "no man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John, 14:6), or when the Prophet of Islam says that "no man shall meet God who has not first met the Prophet," the perennial philosopher will understand these sayings to mean (in addition to their all-too-evident exoteric and exclusivist meanings): access to the Real is to be attained through the universal Logos, one particular manifes-

Alan Watts, and Mahesh Yogi. See Whitall Perry, C*hallenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), pp. 7-16, 65-79 for a thorough critique of these authors. Among this group must also be placed the author Aldous Huxley, well known for his anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). This work, despite its many excellent selections, is flawed through its individualistic commentary, wherein the author "picks and chooses" whatever in religion is to his liking, and on the contrary dismisses all that is not in keeping with his idiosyncratic tastes.

[24] "A vine has been planted without the Father and, as it is not established, it will be pulled up by its roots and be destroyed" (*The Gospel According to Thomas*, Logion 40).

[25] William Stoddart, O*utline of Buddhism* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1998), p. 33.

[26] Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Perennial Books, 1987), p. 118.

tation of which is Jesus Christ and another of which is the Prophet of Islam; but others of which include: Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Rama, the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Pte San Win (the "White Buffalo Cow Woman," celestial revealer of the Sacred Pipe to the Native American Lakota Indians). By proceeding in such a manner—both universalist and esoterist—the perennial philosopher discerns the "underlying religion" within the religious tradition to which he is called by divine Providence; he sees with the eye of his heart that Truth, Prayer, Virtue, and Beauty are the heart of religion and thus the "religion of the heart."

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