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The "Foreword" to *Language of the Self*

by

V. Raghavan

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> "Internally" every religion is the doctrine of the one Self and its earthly manifestation, as also the way leading to the abolition of the false self or the way of the mysterious reintegration of our "personality" in the celestial Prototype. (p. 234)

It is a matter of singular satisfaction to the present writer to be associated with this book, the first publication in India of a class of writings which, if not so well known in this country, has nevertheless contributed in a unique way to the true understanding of Hinduism in the West. This is a class of writings different from the more widely known one of the 'Orientalists', but may be considered the consummation of the work which these 'Orientalists' had done since their discovery of Sanskrit or the East by editing and translating Eastern classics and tracing the development of the different branches of Oriental thought. To adopt the language of the *Mundaka*, all that they have done may be called the *aparā vidyā*, while the class of writings dealt with here may be deemed the *para vidyā.* An eminent figure who easily passed from the former to the latter[1] and who is not only well known in this country but widely adored, is Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Another name that comes in this line is that of the French savant René Guénon, the quintessence of whose teachings Coomaraswamy himself brings together in his essay, "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge". Guénon's *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* and *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedānta* are now much-marked books in Indian libraries. More recently Huxley, Isherwood and Heard, of another eminent group, have, with their writings on the *Vedānta* and *Philosophia Perennis*, captured, so to say, the imagination

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[1] Like Truth, the same *sādhaka* may have modes and levels; and one can pass from one kind of study to the other without looking down upon the other, or fearing the loss of caste by mixing with those of another school, or being accused of having as if two distinct brains.

of Indians. To this elite of authentic exponents in the West of Eastern wisdom belongs Frithjof Schuon whom it is the privilege of the present writer to introduce to our readers here.

Schuon, who had associations with Guénon, is German by birth, French by upbringing and Swiss by residence. His writings, which are in French, have appeared, comparatively recently, in English—*Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Faber and Faber, 1953), *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Faber and Faber, 1954), *Gnosis—Divine Wisdom* (John Murray, 1959). The present collection of his essays has been translated by two close associates of his, who have, like him, received initiation in Oriental traditions, Marco Pallis, author of *Peaks and Lamas*, and Macleod Matheson, translator of Schuon's *Spiritual Perspectives*. This is the first time that a collection of Schuon's essays is published in this country in whose heritage of wisdom he is immersed and in the interpretation (*manana*) of which he has ever been engaged. It is but appropriate that Ganesh & Co—who have published the expositions by another foreign savant and *sādhaka*, Arthur Avalon, of another aspect of Indian traditional *upāsanaā*, the *Śākta*—are bringing out this volume. Nothing is perhaps more significant or has climaxed this effort in a more befitting manner than the fact that His Holiness Śrī Śankarācārya, Jagadguru on the Śrī Kāmakoti Pītha, has been pleased to accept the dedication of this book to him; the orthodoxy and authenticity of Schuon's exposition stand in need of no further testimony.

In the foregoing lines the words Tradition and Orthodoxy—quite unfashionable these days—have been used. At the outset a certain distinctiveness and distinction were also claimed for the class of writings to which those presented here belong. What are the chief features of their approach? Firstly, these writings bring out the fact that underlying the different religions of the world there is a common tradition and a basic unity. To quote Schuon, 'explicitly to practise one religion is implicitly to practise them all' (*Gnosis*, p. 33). This common tradition is the 'gnosis or the *philosophia perennis* which is the connecting link between the different religious languages' (*ibid*., p. 27).

Secondly, while Truth is one, Revelation or Tradition or Form is naturally diverse, thanks to the infinity of divine possibility (*ibid*., p. *29*). While orthodoxy which represents divine necessity is the conforming to this basic gnosis, originality, which represents divine freedom[2] comprehends the different forms this gnosis puts forth at different times or in different parts of the world. '…The diverse revelations do not really contradict one another, since they do not apply to the same receptacle and since God never addresses the same message to two or more receptacles…' (*Gnosis*, pp. 29-30). In the words of Guénon (*Introduction*, p. 201), 'differences in doctrines, in order to be legitimate, can only be a mere matter of adaptation, modifying the more or less external forms of expression but in no wise touching the principles themselves';[3] '…according to men's varying capacity', God 'taught them at one time one thing and at another

[2] p. 100.

[3] *Cf.* Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, p. 124: 'Every tradition is necessarily an adaptation…'

time another, as circumstances required'.[4] '… Every traditional form is superior[5] to the others in a particular respect and it is this characteristic which in fact indicates the sufficient reason for., the existence of that form.'

Thirdly, while a search in the writings of the different religions of the world has shown that this gnosis or knowledge of the Self forms the core of all the religions, it is in Hinduism that it is found in a most pronounced form and has never been forgotten. Also, the Hindu heritage is precious for another reason: it is not only 'the most ancient of the living traditional forms' but 'it possesses a certain superiority or centrality with respect to later forms' (*Transcendent Unity*, p. 51).[6] 'Hinduism has the faculty of combining all the perspectives which elsewhere are mutually exclusive.' While combining through the doctrine of *adhikāra-bheda* and *ruci* (spiritual temperament) the different perspectives (*darśanas*), 'Hinduism does not lose sight of unity; it has a tendency to see unity in diversity and in each element of this diversity.' (*Spiritual Perspectives*, pp. 66, 68).

Fourthly, the highest of these perspectives is Gnosis, the metaphysic of the Self, the *Vedānta*. 'That the way of Knowledge, if *jñanā-mārga*, is among spiritual ways the highest, and in a still more ultimate sense, that it is *the* spiritual way as such, the one in which all other ways finally must merge, is a fundamental truth to which all traditional teachings bear witness either openly or else by implication.' Of 'those doctrines and methods that keep closest to true knowledge as the " highest" ways open to man', 'the Hindu *Vedānta* provides an example that conforms in its presentation, as near as conceivably possible, to the goal it sets itself, which is Deliverance total and unqualified.'[7] As to Śankara and the Sufis, to these writers too, knowledge alone delivers. The doctrine of *Bhakti*, Hindu or Christian, does not contradict that of *Jñāna*, for 'the conceptions of Rāmānuja are contained in those of Śankara and are transcended by them'. 'Rāmānuja affirms against Śankarācārya truths which the latter never denied on their own level.' (p. 24). Like faith,[8] devotion is a pre-condition of knowledge; there have been no greater hymnists in India than Śankara; for, to one who has realised the Self, it is more natural than not, as the *Bhāgavata* says, to be singing of the Lord.[9] Not only Ramakrishna, but many a forebear of

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[4] p. 101.

[5] *Transcendent Unity*, p. 50. To be more precise one should rather say that every traditional form *specialises* in a particular aspect. Cf. p. 68: 'That one enunciation may be less direct in its form than another is no proof whatever of a lesser wisdom but solely of a lesser receptivity on the part of the particular environment.'

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 107, *fn.*, '…Hinduism represents the Primordial Tradition…'

[7] p. 46.

[8] *Śraddhāvān labhate jñānam, Gitā* IV. 39. *Cf.* 'It is for certain men who have been allowed to pass from faith to gnosis …' (Clement of Alexandria).

[9] See Ch. XLII 'From Bhakti to Jñāna and Back' in the *Call of the Jagadguru*, lecture by the present

his has been this *bhaktajñānin.* Also, when the *Upanisad* says of the Supreme Self '*yam evaisa vrnute tena labhyah tasyaisa ātmā vrnute tanūm svām'*, there is, as it were, a synthesis of *Jñāna* and *Bhakti*. It is in this light that statements such as that of St. Macarius of Egypt, 'Love is inseparable from knowledge', are to be understood. Between different approaches, e.g., *Bhakti* and *Jñāna*, it is, therefore, not a question of error and truth, but one of lesser truth and greater truth[10] or of different gradations of the universal reality (*Transcendent Unity*, p. *38*).[11]

Fifthly, between the subject to be realised which is *Sat*; *Cit* and *Ānanda* and the objective world superimposed on it, 'there is interposed a direct objectivation of the subject' which mediates in the re-integration, the trinity of the *avatāra*, the *guru* and the revelation or *mantra*[12]. 'The Absolute reveals itself also, to the same sage, in an objective manner, by springing up suddenly in the mind in the form of sacred words; and the Absolute reveals itself also in the giving of inspired Texts which are to be the support of life and of spiritual realisation to an entire civilisation; in such a case the Absolute never reveals itself in subjective mode, except in the case of certain *Avatāras* whose body and mind manifest the self in a manner eminently more direct than with the ordinary sage…' (p. 57).

Sixthly, the East and Hinduism in particular are note-worthy for preserving not only this tradition of gnosis, but what is very important today, the 'techniques of realisation' (p. 229). For 'knowledge is not merely a matter of right theory … but is something to be "actualized" with the help of a method running parallel to the doctrine …' (p. 48). Foremost among these techniques is *Yoga*—to which Schuon devotes a chapter in this book—which as described by Patanjali includes the virtues and that unique mode called *japa,* which runs like a golden thread through *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Jñāna,* and assimilates the former two to the last.

Lastly, 'as the "spiritual technique" is essentially the art of concentration' (p. 89), the traditional ideology favours art, which in origin was the imitation of divine act or the analogy used by revelation for exegesis, 'as a direct aid to spirituality' (p. 108); 'the spiritual *efficacy* of aesthetic supports is in the very nature of things', for 'apart from the intrinsic value of beauty' 'the efficacy of art is to be found in the unifying power of aesthetic experience'.[13] As he says in his *Spiritual Perspectives*: 'There is something in our intelligence which wants to live at rest,

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Śankarācārya of Kāñcī, Ganesh & Co.

[10] p. 6.

[11] 'Reality affirms itself by degrees, but without ceasing to be "one", the inferior degrees of this "affirmation" being absorbed, by metaphysical integration or synthesis, into the superior degrees… Furthermore Being Itself, which is none other than the "Personal God", is in its turn surpassed by the "Impersonal"…' (*Transcendent Unity*, p. 53).

[12] p. 18.

[13] *Cf.* Nāda-yoga, pp. 36-55, Introduction to the *Spiritual Heritage of Tyāgarāja*, Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home, Madras.

something in which the conscious and unconscious meet in a kind of passive activity, and it is this element to which the lofty and easy language of art speaks. The language is lofty because of the spiritual symbolism of its form and the nobility of its style; it is easy because of the aesthetic mode of assimilation.' (p. 29)

Guénon, who was the pioneer to expound these ideas, expressed himself forcefully and decisively; at the same time his style was clear, straight and succinct. In Schuon, his follower, we have his commentator, his *bhāsya-kāra*, if we may say so, who delights more in analysis, dialectics and aphoristic enunciations.[14] He develops further the topics—orthodoxy and heterodoxy, metaphysic and intellectuality, esoterism and exoterism, East and West, etc.—which Guénon had dealt with earlier. Naturally while examining these concepts more intensely, Schuon has to go into many a detail. For example, while on the question of the value of traditions, one would naturally expect the question of accretions and decay to be tackled. The explanations which the author seeks may not all be satisfactory, e.g., on the spread of Buddhism or Islam in India (*Transcendent Unity, pp.* 107-110).[15] But in these and other similar discussions, the author's critical acumen shows that the doctrine of traditionalism does not mean credulousness nor turning a blind eye to certain defects caused by the historical conditions,[16] time-cycle, and *purusa-dosa* (defects which human nature is always prone to)[17] that might overlay and obscure or lead to some aberrations in a tradition.

While in discussions on such questions, which cannot be carried on without getting involved in the historical method, differences of opinion are inevitable, on the timeless aspects of Tradition and Knowledge one would find in these pages interpretation which is illuminating and, with reference to the Hindu doctrines of *Vedānta*, *Toga*, etc., perfectly authentic. Chapter VI here, read along with the corresponding chapters in Schuon's two other books, forms an important contribution which adds to Coomaraswamy's exposition of sacred art and traditional aesthetic; particularly noteworthy is the author's effort here to emancipate art from evaluation based on period, environment and movement and from the obsession of originality and the notion that for a genius to flower forth, it is necessary to make innovations. While the long chapter on the principle of distinction in social order puts forth a reasoned explanation of Caste

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[14] While the present volume of his essays has many examples of this last mentioned category, his *Spiritual Perspectives* is almost fully in the form.

[15] What is said on p. 110 here is hardly correct; it is not as if Hinduism or Śankara did away with Buddhism in India; it was Muslim expansion which dealt the death blow by destroying in India, as outside also, the Buddhistic monasteries.

[16] *Cf.* Ch. VIII, "The Meaning of Race", p. 199, on the tendency of the traditional worlds to exaggeration, illogicality and facile prejudices. See also his *Transcendent Unity*, p. 38 on traditions which outlive their usefulness.

[17] *Cf. Spiritual Perspectives*, p. 20, 'Abuses are in human nature and especially so, when human nature is expressed in a collectivity.'

so far as the Hindu tradition is concerned, the next on the meaning of Race underlines the leading endowments and originality, with special reference to spiritual inheritance, of the different peoples of the world, and evaluates them on the basis of the three *gunas—Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. "The Sacred Pipe of the Red Indians" (Ch. IX) exposes ideas which show the universality of the traditional wisdom and would be of special interest to Hindus for their parallels in the *Veda* and *Upanisad.*[18]

Perhaps the greatest gain from this study of world religions is the discovery of their underlying unity[19] and of the fact that they are but diverse 'paths that lead to the same summit'. It is also clear that this unity could lie only in the doctrine of gnosis, for it is knowledge that has no history. The realisation of this truth would obviate the evangelical obsession of certain faiths, which by admixture of violence, exploitation or corruption of one kind or another or by dilution of the teaching, carry out their expansionism. As Aldous Huxley says: 'Like any other form of imperialism, theological imperialism is a menace to permanent world peace. The reign of violence will never come to an end until, first, most human beings accept the same true philosophy of life; until, second, this perennial philosophy is recognised as the highest factor common to all the world religions; until, third, the adherents of every religion renounce the idolatrous time-philosophies, with which, in their own particular faith, the perennial philosophy of eternity has been overlaid…'[20] This does not mean a watering down of faith or the growth of a religious indifference; it is only a curative of sectarianism. Every religion is unique and the aspirant devoted to it should essay in it with that faith but when he has reached the goal, he no longer sees any diversity. This has been affirmed so far as the manifold perspectives within the Indian tradition are concerned continuously by the *Veda*, the *Upanisad*, the *Gitā*, and the hymns of saints and devotees, but it was left to Ramakrishna in modern times to demonstrate this in respect of the non-Indian religious traditions too, Christianity and Islam.[21] In 1926, a European student of *Vedānta* met His Holiness Sri Sankarācārya of Śrngeri and at the end of the conversation wanted to know if Hinduism took converts. 'No, rather it is needless for Hinduism to take converts,' so saying, His Holiness explained why Hinduism was called *Santana Dharma*, the Eternal Law. The European said that he had no idea when he came that he would be going

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[18] See especially pp. 202, 205, 208.

[19] See also '*How Can Christian and Non-Christian Religions Co-operate?*' by F. Heiler, Marburg, *Hibbert Journal, LLI, January,* 1954.

[20] *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 229

[21] See 'Sri Ramakrishna: The Proof of the Validity and Vitality of Hinduism', *Vedānta Kesari*, Madras, April, 1941. For a correct estimate of Ramakrishna, the following from Schuon cannot possibly be excelled, (p. 37): 'In Ramakrishna there is something which seems to defy every category; he was like the living symbol of the inner unity of religions; he was, in fact, the first Saint deliberately wishing to penetrate "foreign" spiritual forms… In the present time of confusion, disarray and doubt, he was the Saint called to "verify" forms and "reveal," if one can so express it, their single truth.'

away from His Holiness with a desire to be a better Christian. His Holiness observed in conclusion that an artist howsoever capable required a stable background of canvas for his painting. 'Apply your God-given gifts on the stable background of your own God-chosen faith, Christianity. When the painting is over and you are contemplating the beauty of the picture, the background may fade away from your view of its own accord…'

Further there is this inherent contradiction in conversion. People in different areas of the earth, brought up in different social, historical and cultural background, when they are converted, really effect a conversion in the Faith imposed on or induced in them; and while different forms of a Faith thus arise in different regions, in some cases, the strong character of an eminent convert or the well-settled nature of a converted community really alters or introduces new elements in the doctrines or practices; the result is the original uniqueness of a tradition is lost or blurred.

The service that this group of writers in the West have done is both to the East and the West. The integration they have achieved on the basis of a traditional and spiritual outlook is not exactly Oriental, for as they have shown, this outlook is common to the mediaeval and scholastic West. 'What we have in mind for the Christian,' says Schuon (p. 229), 'is a return to his own sources and not an orientalisation of the West.' 'If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern, but because this *is* metaphysics… It is only because this metaphysics still survives as a living power in Eastern societies, in so far as they have not been corrupted by the withering touch of Western, or rather *modern*, civilisation,… and not to orientalise the West, but to bring back the West to a consciousness of the roots of her own life and values… that Guénon asks us to turn to the East.'[22]

The message of these writers is not less needed, nor ever more opportune than today, for the East, which under the impact of different forces from the modern West is either 'sleeping over its truths', or indulging in a 'spiritual demagogy' busy preparing versions of its teachings acceptable to the modern West, or 'committing suicide' by working itself up into a frenzy that it had been terribly mistaken down the centuries and that, cutting itself completely from its hoary moorings, it should now set itself, in the wake of the modern West, to work for the Utopia of increased production, improved standard of living and an equality instead of quality. That India and the greater part of the East are now free from Western colonialism is no guarantee that their traditions would be conserved. As Gai Eaton observes:[23] 'It is far too early to tell how profoundly Western ideas may have penetrated the basic structures of life in India, but it is clear that the process of penetration has by no means ceased with the abdication of the British Raj; the country, now regarded as 'politically mature' because its traditional forms have been more or

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[22] Coomaraswamy, *Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge*.

[23] *The Richest Vein: Eastern Tradition and Modern Thought,* p. 17. Faber and Faber. See also *Language of the Self,* p. 198.

less undermined, has been left to the tender mercies of Westernised Indians who are unlikely to show such moderation as we did in tampering with the old way of life.' Both Guénon and Schuon have taken special pains to criticise modern Indian scholars or teachers who have had to 'present', so to say, the orthodox tradition of India for Western acceptance.[24] But one may not consider this the chief sin of modern India when one reflects on the long history of Hindu thought, during almost the whole course of which it had been submitted to the impact of forces both internal and external, and finds that, without sacrificing its fundamentals, Hindu tradition had always put forth adaptations of forms, and that indeed it is these diversified forms which justify the claim of this culture to 'formal amplitude'. On the other hand, the real danger is from that total Westernisation in which the East is fast, thoughtlessly, throwing away its precious heritage. In their denunciation of modern Western civilisation and in the way to regeneration that they have pointed out through the recovery of the traditional spirit, it is the East that these savants have shown as supplying the key to that treasure of spiritual wisdom. To many modern Indians and their leaders who are intensely allergic to the words *Tradition* and *Orthodoxy*, this growing school of Western thinkers should act as a shock-absorber. Their re-affirmation of the value of this ancient, in fact timeless, wisdom should lead to a reawakening in the East, and to an arrest of the spreading decay of its tradition. Let not that contingency arise in which, for this ancient wisdom, as for our antique artware, we would one day have to go to the West where it has been taken and treasured by a band of *vivekins*! And for awakening us with their true and revealing exposition of this knowledge, these *vivekins* of the West are entitled to our gratitude and respect,—*rsivat te'pi pūjyās syuh*, as Garga of yore said of the *śāstra-jñas* of the West.

Śrāvana Eula Pūrnimā
Veda-upākarma
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V. RAGHAVAN
University of Madras

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[24] To many here the criticism in this connection of Vivekananda by both Guénon and Schuon may appear somewhat excessive, but it may be pointed out that Schuon himself (p. 43), indicates the lines on which the inevitable emergence and role of Vivekananda or Gandhi might be fruitfully examined and understood.