From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

Crossing Religious Frontiers

Editorial

Readers of the original series of *Studies in Comparative Religion* (1963-1987) will be familiar with the name of Marco Pallis, a regular contributor to the journal and a friend and collaborator of the other great perennialists whose work also appeared frequently—René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, and Frithjof Schuon among them. It is fitting, then, that in this new series we should take the title of one of Pallis' essays to identify the governing theme of this issue which also includes pieces by all of these figures. In keeping with the editorial policy of the new series, we will continue to publish landmark essays which have not previously appeared in this journal. Another token of the continuities between the old and new series is the contribution, in this issue, from William Stoddart, the Assistant Editor of the first series of *SCR*. However, the new series will also keep readers abreast of more recent writings which evince, to one degree or another, a traditional outlook. In these pages readers will not only find contributions from established authors such as Rodney Blackhirst, James Cutsinger, Peter Kingsley, Patrick Laude, Tim Scott, and Charles Upton, but pieces by younger authors here appearing in print for the first time. It is encouraging to witness the emergence of a new generation of writers who are deeply engaged with the same issues that commanded the attention of those earlier writers who took their bearings from Guénon, the towering French metaphysician whose work answered the urgent necessities of the peculiar cyclical and terrestrial conditions in which we find ourselves. Whilst Guénon laid bare the metaphysical principles which inform the world's great religious and sapiential traditions it remained to Frithjof Schuon to articulate the essence of the *religio perennis* which is the underlying theme of this issue. In many regards it might be said that the whole perennialist movement of recent times is an elaboration and application of the generative work of Guénon and Schuon.

We are living in an unprecedented situation in which the different religious traditions are everywhere impinging on each other. There has, of course, always been some exchange of ideas and influences between the great religious cultures, sometimes at quite a profound level. Nevertheless, each civilization formerly exhibited a spiritual homogeneity undisturbed, for the most part, by the problem of religious pluralism. In former times, just as man appeared as "man" and not as "yellow man" or "white man," and just as each language seemed to its practitioners to be language as such, so too each religion, for most adherents, appeared as "religion" or "the way" without further qualification. For the vast majority of believers in a traditional civilization the question of the interrelationship of the religions was one which was either of peripheral concern or one of which they remained unaware. As Martin Lings has remarked,

> Needless to say our ancestors were aware of the existence of other religions besides their own; but dazzled and penetrated as they were by the great light shining directly above them, the sight of more remote and—for them—more obliquely shining lights on the horizons could raise no positive interest nor did it create problems. Today, however those horizons are no longer remote; and amidst the great evil which results from all that has contributed to bring them near, some good has also inevitably stolen its way in.[1]

[1] Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1991), p. 70.

This phenomenon is addressed not only in Pallis' essay from which this issue of SCR takes its title, but, in one way or another, in all of the articles which the reader will find herein.

It hardly needs saying that the homogeneity of Christian civilization has long since been ruptured by secularist ideologies of one kind and another. In the last few centuries Europe has, in turn, been the agent for the disruption and sometimes extirpation of traditional cultures the world over. Comparative religion itself, as a field of study was, in part, the product of the cultural contacts to which an aggressive European imperialism gave rise. Since then all manner of changes have made for a "smaller" world in which it is impossible to ignore the presence of religious cultures and traditions different from our own. The interrelationships of the religions today is an issue which has taken on a new immediacy in the cyclical conditions in which we live, especially for all those concerned with fostering a harmonious world community. Furthermore, in an age of rampant secularism and scepticism the need for some kind of interreligious solidarity makes itself ever more acutely felt. At a time when "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religions greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion"[2] the exposure of the underlying unity of the religions becomes an imperative task—one that can only be achieved through a properly constituted esoterism. The open confrontation of different exoterisms, the destruction of traditional civilizations, and the tyranny of profane ideologies all play a part in determining the peculiar circumstances in which the most fundamental needs of the age can only be met by a recourse to traditional esoterisms. As Schuon wrote half a century ago, "That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen".[3] This, alas, is no less true in the religious domain than in any other. At a time of volatile intra- and inter-religious tensions it is incumbent on perennialists to affirm the "profound and eternal solidarity of all spiritual forms".[4]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr has observed that

> The essential problem that the study of religion poses is how to preserve religious truth, traditional orthodoxy, the dogmatic theological structures of one's own tradition, and yet gain knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritually valid ways and roads to God.[5]

The resolution of the peculiar tensions and antagonisms arising out of our new global circumstances, and the fulfilment of its inherent spiritual possibilities, is one of the most momentous tasks facing all those concerned with the spiritual welfare of humankind. The perennialist exposition of the *sophia perennis* furnishes the *only* completely consistent and coherent explication of the interrelationships of the great religious traditions—in other words, the *only* satisfactory basis on which to resolve the problems arising out of religious pluralism in the modern world, at least in the intellectual domain. The traditionalist outlook decisively resolves the problem spotlighted by Nasr by providing an understanding which affirms the

[2] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1993), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

[3] Schuon, "No Activity Without Truth", in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. Jacob Needleman (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1974), p. 28.

[4] Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, xxxiv.

[5] Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1991), p. 127.

inner unity of religions but at the same time honors their diversity. Because of its premium on the "incalculable value" of religious orthodoxy, a properly constituted perennialism does not threaten religious commitments—indeed it insists on them—but shows how the formal antinomies of different theologies can be resolved in a trans-religious metaphysical synthesis, in Coomaraswamy's words, in "an intellectual wisdom . . . independent of all environmental idiosyncrasy." *Studies in Comparative Religion* is committed to this ongoing work.

"Crossing Religious Frontiers" is a theme which can be inflected in many ways, as is evident from the range of articles gathered together here. Our material has been organized under three rubrics: "Principles", encompassing explications of those metaphysical axioms which comprise the *sophia perennis* and which must control our understanding of the proper relations between the great mythological, religious and sapiential traditions; "Perspectives" wherein those principles are brought to bear on particular interreligious issues and phenomena; and "Encounters", where we find more discursive and anecdotal accounts from and about wayfarers who have engaged directly in an experiential frontier-crossing. Of course, this organization is somewhat arbitrary and several of the articles might easily have been situated under another heading.

Let me close with another reference to Marco Pallis' essay, "Crossing Religious Frontiers". Writing of the work of Frithjof Schuon, he says this:

> It exemplifies the power to penetrate all traditional forms as well as to render them mutually intelligible for the sake of those who, not by evading but rather by faithfully observing the claims of form where they properly belong, will make of this obedience not a shuttered but an open window, one through which light and air are able to penetrate and from which the imprisoned bird can start forth on an unhindered flight.

It is my hope that the pieces assembled here will, each in its own way, serve something of the same high purpose.

Harry Oldmeadow