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11. At Variance with Guénon

In my early youth, my salvation was
Shrī Shankara, and with him, spiritual virtue;
And so I was able to learn: only inspiration,
And not vain thinking, can give Wisdom.
Then came the notion of tradition:
Only the sacred may carry the sacred.

All this Guénon wrote in his works with great
diligence And zeal. But much still remained to be said![1]

Frithjof Schuon always respected the metaphysical and conceptual framework articulated by René Guénon, whose writings were particularly important to him at the time when he was beginning to formulate his own perspective. Starting in 1939 and continuing throughout the rest of his life, Schuon delved into many subjects that Guénon never considered or only touched upon lightly, including Buddhism and American Indian spirituality, sacred art in its diverse forms, and, especially, the operative aspects of spiritual realization—prayer of the heart and the human virtues. Martin Lings, who was Guénon's personal assistant in Cairo during the 1940s, later expressed an observation that first became apparent in these years: "There is nothing in Guénon that is not to be found in Schuon. There is much in Schuon that is not to be found in Guénon."[2] When, after the war, communication could be resumed between Guénon in Cairo and Schuon in Lausanne, Guénon was generally supportive of Schuon's point of view on these subjects and particularly appreciative of Schuon's interest in American Indian spirituality.

Schuon also began to express views on both Christianity and Buddhism that differed from the elder writer's well-established conclusions. Guénon had followed Shankara in condemning Buddhism as a heresy, an idea that Schuon, who had profoundly experienced Buddhism's spiritual perfume, could not possibly accept. Guénon corresponded on this issue with Schuon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and Marco Pallis,[3] a Buddhist practitioner and one of Schuon's followers. In the final years of his life they persuaded Guénon to change his opinion on Buddhism and to accept it as an authentic religion, although he never had the opportunity to amend the many incorrect statements on Buddhism that occur in his earlier writings.[4]

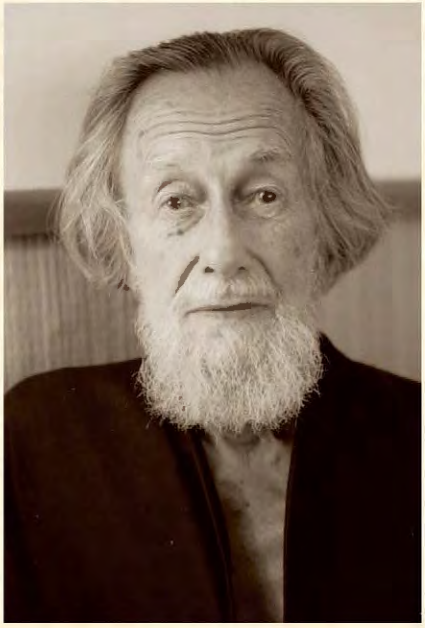
On the subject of Christianity, Guénon was of the opinion that it had lost its original esoteric character in the third or fourth century, concluding that the Christian Church no longer possessed its original meaning and value; to the contrary, Schuon believed in the continued efficacy of the Christian

Ananda Coomaraswamy

"Coomaraswamy is an extremely precious author."
(letter to Martin Lings, April 4, 1956)

Marco Pallis

Martin Lings



rites. "[A]ccording to Guénon, the sacraments later lost their initiatic character, but this is impossible in principle and in fact: in principle, because God never gives less than He promises—rather it is the reverse that is true—and in fact, because it is technically impossible to operate such a change. . .".[5]

Despite his respect for Guénon, Schuon could not disregard his own convictions. The French edition of Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* was published in January, 1948 and included several chapters on Christianity. It was followed in May by the article "Mystères Christiques" ("Christic Mysteries"), which emphasized the esoteric nature of the Christian sacraments.[6] Where the book presented a fundamentally different approach to Guénon on Christianity, the subsequent article implicitly disagreed with many of Guénon's positions. These publications marked the forty-year old Schuon's intellectual independence from Guénon.[7]

Nonetheless, the correspondence between these two originators of what would later be called the Perennialist (or Traditionalist) school,[8] remained cordial until Guénon's death in January 1951. In all of Guénon's letters to Schuon during the late 1930s and '40s, including the last one written three months before his death in October 1950, Guénon used the introductory expression, "Most Excellent Shaykh and Beloved Brother." However, it is also true that a "polemic [between Schuon and Guénon] was carried on by intermediaries who often did more than they were asked."[9]

The inevitable and unfortunate result of the open divergences between Guénon and Schuon,[10] including their public disagreement concerning the Christian sacraments, was that some people felt compelled to take one side or the other rather than recognize the many points upon which the two men were in agreement. "Once Guénon had published his article on the sacraments, with which I could not agree—and also because I knew myself to be spiritually independent and in many things felt and acted otherwise than Guénon wished—troubles broke out in my community; some members left me, a part of them going over to a false Hinduism and a part to Catholicism; in the Paris group there was a split because a number of them saw the master not in me but in Guénon."

Despite this break, the group in Paris under the direction of Michel Vâlsan continued to trace its lineage to the Prophet Muhammad through Schuon, who had initiated Vâlsan and many of his followers into Sufism. And in fact, the severity of the break proved to be temporary because in 1958 Vâlsan traveled to Lausanne to meet with his former spiritual guide, apologized to him, and asked to become again one of his disciples. Schuon declined the request because of Vâlsan's somewhat different point of departure, although he gave his blessing to Vâlsan's independent branch of the

Shādhiliyyah-Darqāwiyyah Tarīqah, which exists to this day. Schuon wrote to Vâlsan:

> If you feel a very direct and very profound bond with the person of René Guénon—somewhat like what I feel for the Shaykh al-'Alawī—I would be the last to reproach you for this; and likewise if, from a doctrinal point of view, you intend to follow as closely as possible the path set by Guénon; what I have in mind are certain particularities about which a choice can be made, not the great principles that apply to everyone. Your group must have a sufficient reason for being, and this reason can only be Guénon's particularity, and your affinities with it, or your natural desire not to follow another particularity of character. For this, I bless you; but do not ask me to follow you in this; I would not even have the right to do so.[11]

There are a number of letters between Schuon and Vâlsan during this time of reconciliation, which also resulted in the resurgence of *Études traditionnelles* under Vâlsan's leadership and with the participation of Schuon and many of his followers. In a letter written shortly after Vâlsan's death, Schuon claims "the highest degree of honor . . . for my former adversary Vâlsan, whose position I always respected—it was that of Guénon—and with whom, in spite of our divergences, I had good relations until his death."[12]

Vâlsan is representative of those individuals who disassociated themselves from Schuon in an honorable manner. However, there were others who, when unable to accept one of Schuon's principles, reacted with personal attacks against him. Calumnies were, therefore, a recurring part of Schuon's life, as is the case with almost all eminent persons whose opinions have an impact on the lives of others.[13] Though he keenly felt the pain of these disappointments,[14] he never lost that underlying serenity which is the touchstone of true faith, knowing full well that "It is necessary to accept 'God's Will' whenever evil may enter into our destiny and cannot possibly be avoided; indeed the partially paradoxical nature of All-Possibility requires of man an attitude that is in conformity with the situation, namely the quality of serenity, of which the sky above is the visible symbol. Serenity, so to speak, is to place oneself above the clouds, in an ambience of coolness and void, and far from the dissonances of this low world."[15]

Chapter 11: At Variance with Guénon

[1] *Songs without Names*, Fourth Collection, XXII, 163.

[2] Film interview, 1993.

[3] Marco Pallis (1895-1989) was born in England to Greek parents. His devotion to mountain climbing led him to the Himalayas, where he became fascinated by Buddhism in its Tibetan form. His first book, *Peaks and Lamas*, describes both the course of his Himalayan mountaineering expeditions as well as the path that he took to commit himself to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. His two later works, *The Way and the Mountain* and *A Buddhist Spectrum* are each collections of essays on diverse topics of a traditional nature, often with a focus on the Buddhist tradition. In addition to his own writings, Pallis translated into English several works by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. See chap. 15, "Noteworthy Encounters", 79, for more details on Pallis.

[4] For a discussion of the important role they played in altering Guénon's views, see Marco Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A.K. Coomaraswamy and R. Guénon", 12-13. Guénon cited Coomaraswamy's writings on Buddhism as containing the decisive information upon which he changed his opinion. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1887-1947), described by Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943) as "That noble scholar upon whose shoulders we are still standing" and by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) as "one of the most learned and creative scholars of the century", was one of the world's greatest art historians and scholars of traditional iconography. While serving as a curator to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the latter part of his life, he devoted his work to the explication of traditional metaphysics and symbolism. Coomaraswamy was responsible for creating the collections of oriental art for the Freer Museum, Washington D.C., as well as for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The Princeton University Bollingen Series LXXXIX presented three volumes by Roger Lipsey: *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, *Metaphysics*, and *His Life and Work*. Coomaraswamy was the author of several hundred articles and numerous books.

[5] Letter to a Christian woman, November 21, 1975, quoted in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, "Appendix", 139-140. Guénon was of the opinion that after Christianity had lost its esoteric nature in the third or fourth century, its central teachings and mysteries were kept alive—to this day—by certain secret initiatic organizations such as the Templars, Free-Masons, and various Guilds; he also believed that these organizations still possessed the ability to provide a valid initiation—a secret initiation of which the Church was unaware. Schuon disagreed with each point of Guénon's thesis. (See *René Guénon: Some Observations*, "René Guénon: Some Observations", 37-47.) Schuon's point of view on Catholic initiation is summarized in a letter: "In Christianity, it is baptism, confirmation, and communion that constitute what can be termed initiation; the total character of these sacraments excludes the existence, alongside them, of more or less secret initiatic rites that could be superimposed on them—initiatic rites such as are found in Orphism. . .". (letter to a Christian woman, May 31, 1955)

[6] "The inspiration I had when I wrote 'Mystères Christiques' ['Christic Mysteries'] was twofold: Firstly, that Catholics should pray the rosary fervently, with reference to the old teachings; and secondly, that the sacraments as such are initiations." (letter to Titus Burckhardt, November 29, 1949)

[7] For Schuon's critiques of Guénon see *René Guénon: Some Observations*. See also *World Wheel*, Fourth Collection, XCIII, 30.

[8] In his 1988 Preface to the second edition of *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Schuon affirms that his works, taken as a whole, "contain a complete doctrine—the *sophia perennis* or, if one prefers, integral traditionalism" (xi). The term "Perennialism", when used to refer to the "school of thought" associated with Guénon and Schuon, has the advantage of expressing a direct relationship with this school's presiding idea, that of the *philosophia perennis* and the related ideas of the *sophia perennis* and *religio perennis*. (See Introduction, 29 for the

relationship between these terms.) Because this eternal and sacred wisdom, once revealed, is outwardly transmitted through time by the vehicle of tradition (from *tradere*, "to hand down"), the use of the classificatory term "Traditionalism" is also justified. In this context it is important to recall that "there is certainly nothing pejorative about the word ['Traditionalism'] itself. . . ; as a matter of fact, however, it has come to be associated—arbitrarily and reprehensibly so—with an image that inevitably devalues its meaning, namely, 'nostalgia for the past'. . . . If to recognize what is true and just is 'nostalgia for the past', it is clearly a crime or disgrace not to feel this nostalgia. The same applies to other accusations prompted by the idea of tradition, such as 'Romanticism', 'aestheticism', 'folklore'; far from disclaiming any affinity for these things, we adopt them precisely insofar as they have a relationship with either tradition or virgin nature, thus restoring their legitimate and—at the very least—innocent meanings." (*Logic and Transcendence*, "Introduction", 5) However, one must keep in mind the following reservation: "This is not to say that the sacred coincides in an absolute manner with the traditional in the strict sense of the word: that is 'traditional' which is transmitted from a divine source; now we do not say that the latter can manifest outside of the traditional framework, but it can do so independently of inherited formulations, otherwise there would be neither inspiration nor diversity of schools. That is, in the sacred there is a 'vertical' and discontinuous manifestation as well as a 'horizontal' and continuous manifestation." (*From the Divine to the Human*, "The Sense of the Sacred", 109) One must also recognize the fact that the terms "Traditionalism" and "Perennialism" have been applied as labels to widely divergent schools of thought, whose core beliefs often conflict with one another.

[9] Letter to Jean-Pierre Laurant, April 1976, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 31.

[10] Schuon's decision, for example, to accept women as disciples went against the recommendations of Guénon, who had proposed that Schuon neither accept female disciples nor allow women to attend prayer gatherings with men. Catherine Schuon recalls that her husband "was completely against that; he said 'there are intelligent women in the world; why shouldn't they be able to come?' And he wrote all of this to Guénon; but there were discrepancies between what Guénon thought the spiritual path should be and what my husband thought the spiritual path should be." (film interview, 2005)

[11] Letter to Michel Vâlsan, October 9, 1960.

[12] Letter to Jean-Pierre Laurant dated 1976, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 34.

[13] An extreme example of such a personal attack on Schuon came in 1991, when a man tried to coerce him to give a supposed "esoteric benediction" to an adulterous relationship. Schuon refused, and the man sought revenge by making false accusations against him to an assistant prosecutor. On the basis of these allegations, criminal charges were filed against the eighty-four year old philosopher. However, when the chief prosecutor looked at the evidence, he became aware

of the accuser's criminal record, his court-ordered psychological counseling, and the fact that Schuon's accuser had received large amounts of money from the married woman. The chief prosecutor thus immediately dismissed the charges and forced the resignation of the assistant responsible for the case. The police investigator was reassigned to another town. The local newspaper quoted the prosecutor as saying that other than the testimony of one individual "there is not one shred of evidence . . . against Schuon. Insofar as Schuon has been labeled (by the allegations), a miscarriage has occurred." (Bloomington *Herald Times*, November 21, 1991) The prosecutor added that Schuon's accuser "has come under a very large cloud of credibility." (Bloomington *Herald Times*, November 21, 1991) Later the prosecutor acknowledged that "Schuon is owed an apology. . . . A mistake was made by my office . . . and the system broke down." (interview on WTHR Channel 13, November 21, 1991) A few days later the local newspaper's lead editorial, "Schuon Case a Travesty", was strongly critical of the prosecutor's inattention to the case while he was campaigning for a state-wide political office (Bloomington *Herald Times*, November 26, 1991).

It is regrettable that Schuon's humiliated accuser subsequently disseminated a document containing the same perverted allegations that had been discredited by the legal authorities. However, a positive result of this ordeal occurred when, within a week of the charges being dismissed, Schuon agreed to two filmed interviews with a local newspaper reporter. These interviews later provided the basis for the documentary film on his life. His extemporaneous responses to the interview questions help place both his message and his private life—including his spiritual vocation—in a more accessible context. This broader accessibility to the man and his message are a direct result of the incident.

[14] See *World Wheel*, Fifth Collection, C, 76.

[15] *Roots of the Human Condition*, "Cosmic Shadows and Serenity", 110.

The text above is from Chapter 11 of the book
Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy
by Michael O. Fitzgerald.
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