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Traditionalism and the *Sophia Perennis*

Introduction—René Guénon, Tradition and Oriental Metaphysics—Ananda Coomaraswamy, Scholar and Dharma-Warrior—Frithjof Schuon and the *Religio Perennis* in East and West—Other Traditionalists

> *... there are those whose vocation it is to provide the keys with which the treasury of wisdom of other traditions can be unlocked, revealing to those who are destined to receive this wisdom the essential unity and universality and at the same the formal diversity of tradition and revelation.* (Seyyed Hossein Nasr)[1]

Introduction

We have already met with Ananda Coomaraswamy's claim that

> ... if we are to consider what may be the most urgent practical task to be resolved by the philosopher, we can only answer that this is ... a control and revision of the principles of comparative religion, the true end of which science ... should be to demonstrate the common metaphysical basis of all religions ... [2]

This, precisely, is one of the central tasks of a group of thinkers who can be gathered together under the term "traditionalists." It was the French writer René Guénon who was the first to articulate the traditionalist perspective in modern times. Since the time of Guénon's earliest writings, early in the 20th century, a significant traditionalist "school" has emerged with Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon recognized as its most authoritative exponents. The traditionalists are committed to the explication of the timeless wisdom which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind their manifold forms. But, unlike many so-called perennialists, they are also dedicated to the preservation and illumination of the divinely-appointed forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d'être,* providing its formal integrity and ensuring its spiritual efficacy.[3] The traditionalists stand implacably opposed to the prevailing modern

1 S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 126.
2 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilization? and Other Essays*, 18.
3 The traditionalists are still conflated with other so-called "perennialists," despite this fundamental divergence. J.J. Clarke, for instance, lumps together Huxley and Guénon: *Oriental Enlightenment*, 207.

worldview (secular, humanistic and scientific) which originated in the Renaissance and which has been strengthening its tyrannical grip on the modern mentality ever since. We have already had occasion to refer to the works of several traditionalists but in this chapter we will take a sustained look at the lives and work of the "great triumvirate," touching on the principles and themes which govern their work as a whole but highlighting their role in opening the spiritual treasuries of the East to the West without thereby corrupting or compromising the traditional teachings.

René Guénon, Tradition and Oriental Metaphysics

Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote that

> ... the least important thing about Guénon is his personality or biography ... The fact is he has the invisibility that is proper to the complete philosopher: our teleology can only be fulfilled when we really become no one.[4]

The American traditionalist, Whitall Perry, who knew Guénon personally, speaks of his "outer anonymity" and of this "austere yet benevolent figure ... ungraspable and remote."[5] There is indeed something elusive and enigmatic about René Guénon the man. He left an extensive legacy of writings which testify to his achievements as a metaphysician but his personal life remains shrouded in obscurity.

René Guénon was born in Blois in 1886. He grew up in a strict Catholic environment and was schooled by Jesuits. As a young man he moved to Paris to take up studies in mathematics. However, his energies were soon diverted from academic studies and in 1905 he abandoned his preparation for *Grandes Écoles*. For the next few years, seized by what Anatole France called "the vertigo of the invisible," Guénon submerged himself in *fin-de-siècle* French occultism.[6] He became a leading member in several secret societies—Theosophical, spiritualistic, Masonic and "gnostic." From the vantage point of his later work it was a murky period in his life, one of which he apparently did not care to be reminded. Nevertheless, Guénon learned a good deal in this period and indeed, he was eventually to become one of the most unsparing critics of these occultist movements.

In its sociological dimension occultism provided, as doubtless it still does, a framework for the repudiation of the bourgeois ideologies and institutions of the day. Most of the occult groups turned to the archaic past in search of authentic spiritual values against which modern civilization was measured and found wanting. As Mircea Eliade has observed,

4 Letter to Kurt Leidecker, November 1941, A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, 49-50.
5 W. Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History," 160, and "The Man and the Witness," 6.
6 France's phrase is cited in M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, 51.

> ... involvement with the occult represented for the French literary and artistic avant-garde one of the most efficient criticisms and rejections of the religious and cultural values of the West—efficient because it was considered to be based on historical facts.[7]

Although Guénon was to disown the philosophical and historical assumptions on which such movements were built and to contrast their "counterfeit spirituality" with what he came to see as genuine expressions of esotericism, as a traditionalist he remained steadfastly opposed to contemporary European civilization.

Some of these occult movements stimulated a study of ancient esoteric traditions in Egypt, Persia, India and China, and directed attention towards the sacred writings of the East. Precisely how Guénon came to a serious study of Taoism, Hinduism and Islam remains unclear. Whitall Perry has suggested that the "catalyzing element" was Guénon's contact in Paris with some Indians of the *Advaita* school.[8] Guénon's life also entered a new phase in 1912, one marked by his marriage to a devout Catholic. He emerged from the rather subterranean world of the occultists and now moved freely in an intensely Catholic milieu, leading a busy social and intellectual life. The next fifteen years were the most public of Guénon's life. He attended lectures at the Sorbonne, wrote and published widely, gave public lectures himself and maintained many social and intellectual contacts. He published his first books in the 1920s and soon became well known for his work on philosophical and metaphysical subjects.

The years 1927 to 1930 mark another transition in Guénon's life, culminating in his move to Cairo in 1930 and his open commitment to Islam. In January 1928 Guénon's wife died rather abruptly. Following a series of fortuitous circumstances Guénon left on a three-month visit to Cairo.[9] He was to remain there until his death in 1951. In Cairo Guénon was initiated into the Sufic order of Shadilites and invested with the name Abdel Wahed Yahya. He married again and lived a modest and retiring existence.

> ... such was his anonymity that an admirer of his writings was dumbfounded to discover that the venerable next door neighbor whom she had known for years as Sheikh Abdel Wahed Yahya was in reality René Guénon.[10]

A good deal of Guénon's energies were directed in the 1930s to a massive correspondence he carried on with his readers in Europe. Most of Guénon's published work after his move to Cairo appeared in *Études Traditionnelles* (until 1937 *Le Voile d'Isis*), a formerly Theosophical journal which under Guénon's influence was transformed into the principal European forum for traditionalist thought. It was only the war which provided Guénon with

7 M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, 53.
8 W. Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition," 8-9.
9 J.P. Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon," 60.
10 W. Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History," 160.

enough respite from his correspondence to devote himself to the writing of some of his major works, including *The Reign of Quantity* (1945).

The relationship between Guénon's life and his work has engaged the attention of several scholars. Jean-Pierre Laurant has suggested that his intellectual, spiritual and ritual life only achieved a harmonious resolution after his move to Cairo and within the protective embrace of Islam.[11] P.L. Reynolds has charted the influence of his French and Catholic background on his work.[12] Others, especially those committed to traditionalism, have argued that Guénon's whole adult life represents a witness to an unchanging vision of the truth and that his participation in occultism was part of this function.[13] Each of these kinds of claims carries some legitimacy.

Guénon was a prolific writer. He published seventeen books during his lifetime, and at least ten posthumous collections and compilations have since appeared. Here we shall only take an overview of his work. The *oeuvre* exhibits certain recurrent motifs and preoccupations and is, in a sense, all of a piece. Guénon's understanding of tradition is the key to his work. As early as 1909 we find Guénon writing of "... the Primordial Tradition which, in reality, is the same everywhere, regardless of the different shapes it takes in order to be fit for every race and every historical period."[14] As the English traditionalist Gai Eaton has observed, Guénon

> believes that there exists a Universal Tradition, revealed to humanity at the beginning of the present cycle of time, but partially lost ... his primary concern is less with the detailed forms of this Tradition and the history of its decline than with its kernel, the pure and changeless knowledge which is still accessible to man through the channels provided by traditional doctrine ... [15]

The existence of a Primordial Tradition embodying a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles from which derive a succession of traditions each expressing these principles in forms determined by a given

11 J.P. Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon," 66-69.

12 P.L. Reynolds, "René Guénon." These influences, Reynolds argues, account for various imbalances and inadvertencies in Guénon's work.

13 Such commentators suggest that his thought does not "evolve" but only shifts ground as Guénon responds to changing circumstances. Thus Michel Valsan, a collaborator on *Ètudes Traditionnelles*, writes: "It is useful to clarify in the present case that the special privilege that belongs to this work of playing the role of truth, regularity, and traditional plenitude in the face of Western civilization derives from the sacred and non-individual character that clothed the function of René Guénon. The man who had to accomplish this function would certainly have been prepared from long ago, rather than improvising [his role]. The matrices of Wisdom had predisposed and formed his being according to a precise economy, and his career fulfilled itself in time by a constant correlation between his possibilities and the exterior cyclic conditions [of the age]." Quoted in the Special Issue of *Ètudes Traditionnelles: Le Sort de l'Occident*, November, 1951 (Translated by Pamela Oldmeadow).

14 R. Guénon, "La Demiurge" *La Gnose* , 1909, quoted in M. Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom," 351.

15 G. Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 188-189.

Revelation and by the exigencies of the particular situation, is axiomatic in Guénon's work.[16] It is a first principle which admits of no argument; nor does it require any kind of "proof" or "demonstration," historical or otherwise.

Guénon's work, from his earliest writings in 1909 onwards, can be seen as an attempt to give a new expression and application to the timeless principles which inform all traditional doctrines. In his writings he ranges over a vast terrain—Vedanta, the Chinese tradition, Christianity, Sufism, mythology from all over the world, the secret traditions of gnosticism, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and so on, always intent on excavating their underlying principles and showing them to be formal manifestations of the one Primordial Tradition. Certain key themes run through all of his writings and one meets again and again such notions as these: the concept of metaphysics transcending all other doctrinal orders; the identification of metaphysics and the "formalization," so to speak, of gnosis (*jnana* if one prefers); the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains; the hierarchic superiority and infallibility of intellective knowledge; the contrast of the modern Occident with the traditional Orient; the spiritual bankruptcy of modern European civilization; a cyclical view of Time, based largely on the Hindu doctrine of cosmic cycles; a contra-evolutionary view of history. Guénon gathered together doctrines and principles from diverse times and places but emphasized that the enterprise was a synthetic one which envisaged formally divergent elements in their principial unity rather than a syncretic one which press-ganged incongruous forms into an artificial fabrication. This distinction is crucial not only in Guénon's work but in traditionalism as a whole.[17]

Guénon repeatedly turned to oriental wisdoms, believing that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It is important not to confuse this Eastward-looking stance with the kind of sentimental exoticism nowadays so much in vogue. As Coomaraswamy noted,

> If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If "Eastern" metaphysics differed from a "Western" metaphysics—one or the other would not be metaphysics.[18]

One of Guénon's translators made the same point in suggesting that if Guénon turns so often to the East it is because the West is in the position of the

> foolish virgins who, through the wandering of their attention in other directions, had allowed their lamps to go out; in order to rekindle the sacred fire,

16 The relationship between the Primordial Tradition and the various traditions needs clarification in that while each tradition in fact derives its overall form and principal characteristics from a particular Revelation, it nevertheless carries over (in many of its aspects) certain essential features of the tradition which precedes it.

17 See R. Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, x-xi, and *Crisis of the Modern World*, 9 & 108ff.

18 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 72-73.

> which in its essence is always the same wherever it may be burning, they must have recourse to the lamps still kept alight.[19]

The contrast between the riches of traditional civilizations and the spiritual impoverishment of modern Europe sounds like a refrain through Guénon's writings. In all his work

> Guénon's mission was twofold: to reveal the metaphysical roots of the "crisis of the modern world" and to explain the ideas behind the authentic and esoteric teachings that still remained alive ... in the East.[20]

Guénon's attempts to visit India were thwarted by the refusal of a visa. Alain Daniélou has speculated on two possible reasons: the British government frowned on any praise of Hinduism lest it fan Indian nationalism; secondly, Guénon's denunciation of the Theosophical Movement may have prompted Annie Besant's intervention against him.[21] (Daniélou adduces no evidence for these suggestions but they are both plausible.)

By way of an expedient we can divide Guénon's writings into five categories, each corresponding roughly with a particular period in his life: the occultist periodical writings of the pre-1912 period; the reaction against and critique of occultism, especially spiritualism and Theosophy; writings on Oriental metaphysics; on aspects of the European tradition and on initiation; and, fifthly, the critique of modern civilization as a whole.

Guénon's earliest writings appeared, as we have seen, in the organs of French occultism. In the light of his later work some of this periodical literature must be considered somewhat ephemeral. Nonetheless the seeds of most of Guénon's work can be found in articles from this period. The most significant, perhaps, were five essays which appeared in *La Gnose* between September 1911 and February 1912, under the title "La constitution de l'être humain et son évolution selon le Védânta"; these became the opening chapters of one of his most influential studies, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, not published until 1925. Other writings from this period on such subjects as mathematics and the science of numbers, prayer and incantation, and initiation, all presage later work.

As early as 1909 we find him attacking what he saw as the misconceptions and confusions abroad in the spiritualist movements.[22] Whilst his misgivings about many of the occultist groups were growing in the 1909-1912 period it was not until the publication of two of his earliest books that he mounted a full-scale critique: *Le théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo religion* (1921) and *L'erreur spirite* (1923). The titles are suggestive: these were lacerating attacks not only on theosophy and spiritualism but also on the "Gnostic" groups and

19 G. Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 199.
20 J. Needleman, *Foreword to The Sword of Gnosis*, 11-12.
21 A. Daniélou, *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 145.
22 R. Guénon, "La Gnose et les Ecoles Spiritualistes," *La Gnose*, December, 1909.

on movements such as Rosicrucianism. Only the Masons escaped relatively unscathed. As Mircea Eliade has noted:

> The most erudite and devastating critique of all these so-called occult groups was presented not by a rationalist outside observer, but by an author from the inner circle, duly initiated into some of their secret orders and well acquainted with their occult doctrines; furthermore, that critique was directed, not from a skeptical or positivistic perspective, but from what he called "traditional esotericism." This learned and intransigent critic was René Guénon.[23]

The most fundamental part of Guénon's indictment was that such movements, far from preserving traditional esotericisms, were made up of a syncretic mish-mash of distorted and heterogeneous elements forced into a false unity, devoid of any authentic metaphysical framework. Thus they were vulnerable to the scientistic ideologies of the day and inevitably fell prey to the intellectual confusions rampant in Europe. One of the most characteristic confusions of such groups, to cite but one example, was the mistaking of the psychic for the spiritual. Occultism as a whole he now saw as one of the "signs of the times," a symptom of the spiritual malaise in modern civilization. Guénon took up some of these charges again in later works, especially *The Reign of Quantity*.

Guénon's interest in Eastern metaphysical traditions had been awakened some time around 1909 and some of his early articles in *La Gnose* are devoted to Vedantic metaphysics. His first book, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921) marked Guénon as a commentator of rare authority. It also served notice of Guénon's role as a redoubtable critic of contemporary civilization. Of this book Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written,

> It was like a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality.[24]

However, Guénon's axial work on Vedanta was published in 1925, *L'homme et son devenir selon le Védânta*. Other significant works in the field of oriental traditions include *La métaphysique orientale*, delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1925 but not published until 1939, *La Grande Triade*, based on Taoist doctrine, and many articles on such subjects as Hindu mythology, Taoism and Confucianism, and doctrines concerning reincarnation. Interestingly, Guénon remained more or less ignorant of the Buddhist tradition for many years, regarding it as no more than a "heterodox development" within Hinduism and without integrity as a formal religious tradition. It was only through the intervention of Marco Pallis, one of his translators,

23 M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, 51.
24 S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 101.

and Ananda Coomaraswamy, that Guénon revised his attitude to Buddhism. Of Guénon's works on the Hindu tradition, Alain Daniélou said this:

> When I first became interested in the religion and philosophy of India, the only works I found useful were those of René Guénon. *L'Introduction aux doctrines hindoues* remains one of the few works of scholarship that give a true picture of the philosophic and cosmological foundations of Indian civilization.[25]

The quintessential Guénon is to be found in two works which tied together some of his central themes: *La crise du monde moderne* (1927) and his masterpiece, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (1945). The themes of these two books had been rehearsed in an earlier work, *Orient et Occident* (1924). They mounted an elaborate and merciless attack on the foundations of the contemporary European worldview.

The Reign of Quantity is a magisterial summation of Guénon's work. It is, characteristically, a difficult work. He was quite unconcerned with reaching a wide audience and addressed the book to those few capable of understanding it "without any concern for the inevitable incomprehension of the others." He set out to challenge nearly all of the intellectual assumptions current in Europe at the time. The book, he writes, is directed to

> ... the understanding of some of the darkest enigmas of the modern world, enigmas which the world itself denies because it is incapable of perceiving them although it carries them within itself, and because this denial is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of the special mentality whereby it exists.[26]

At first sight the book ranges over a bewildering variety of subjects: the nature of time, space and matter as conceived in traditional and modern science; the philosophical foundations of such typically modern modes of thought as rationalism, materialism and empiricism; the significance of ancient crafts such as metallurgy; the nature of shamanism and sorcery; the "illusion of statistics"; the "misdeeds of psychoanalysis"; the "pseudo-initiatic" pretensions of spiritualism, Theosophy and other "counterfeit" forms of spirituality; tradition and anti-tradition; the unfolding of cosmic and terrestrial cycles. Some study of the book reveals that these apparently disparate strands have been woven into a work of subtle design and dense texture. *The Reign of Quantity* is a chilling indictment of modern civilization as a whole. It has less polemical heat and moral indignation than some of his earlier works but is none the less effective for that. The book is a controlled and dispassionate but devastating razing of the assumptions and values of modern science. At the same time it is an affirmation of the metaphysical and cosmological principles given expression in traditional cultures and religions.

25 A. Daniélou, *The Way to the Labyrinth*, 145. (Daniélou is writing in 1981.)
26 R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 11.

Guénon unfolds a startling thesis about the present terrestrial situation in the light of the doctrine of cosmic cycles. His vision is rooted in the Hindu conception of the *Kali-Yuga* but is not restricted to the purely Indian expression of this doctrine. There is a dark apocalyptic strain in the book which some readers are tempted to dismiss as the rantings of another doom-sayer. For Guénon the dire circumstances in which the modern world finds itself are largely to be explained through an elucidation of the cyclic doctrine whereby humankind is seen to be degenerating into an increasingly solidified and materialized state, more and more impervious to spiritual influences. Inversely, the world becomes increasingly susceptible to infernal forces of various kinds. The forced convergence of different civilizations is the spatial correlate of the temporal unfolding of the present terrestrial cycle, moving towards an inexorable cataclysm.

Closely related to the doctrine of cycles is Guénon's profoundly challenging thesis about the nature of time, space and matter, one based on traditional cosmologies. Contrary to the claims of modern science, says Guénon, time and space do not constitute a uniform continuum in the matrix of which events and material phenomena manifest themselves. Rather, time-and-space is a field of *qualitative* determinations and differences. In other words, the nature of time and space is not a constant, fixed datum but is subject to both quantitative and qualitative change. Any exclusively quantitative and materialistic science such as now tyrannizes the European mind cannot accommodate this principle. It strives rather to reduce qualitatively determined phenomena to the barren and mechanistic formulae of a profane and materialistic science. (One might add that some of the "discoveries" of physicists since Guénon's time have done nothing to disprove his thesis and indeed, to some minds, give it more credibility. Guénon himself would have argued that metaphysical and cosmological principles such as he was applying could in no way be affected by empirical considerations.)[27]

Guénon's critique of scientism—the ideology of modern science—is something quite other than just another attack on scientific reductionism, although that surely is part of his case. Nor is it a catalogue of the inadequacies of this or that scientific theory. Rather, it is a radical and disturbing challenge to almost every postulate of modern European science. The critique hinges on the contrast between sacred, traditional sciences on the one hand, and a profane, materialistic science on the other. In an earlier work Guénon had elaborated the basis of this contrast in uncompromising terms:

> Never until the present epoch had the study of the sensible world been regarded as self-sufficient; never would the science of this ephemeral and changing multiplicity have been judged truly worthy of the name of knowledge ... According to the ancient conception ... a science was less esteemed for itself than for the degree in which it expressed after its own fashion ... a reflection of the higher immutable truth of which everything of any reality

27 See also Chapter 13.

> necessarily partakes ... all science appeared as an extension of the traditional doctrine itself, as one of its applications, secondary and contingent no doubt ... but still a veritable knowledge none the less ... [28]

For Guénon and the other traditionalists, the notion of a self-sufficient, self-validating, autonomous material science is a contradiction, an incongruity, for all sciences must have recourse to higher and immutable principles and truths. Science must be pursued in a metaphysical and cosmological framework which it cannot construct out of itself. In another work Guénon wrote that modern science,

> in disavowing the principles [of traditional metaphysics and cosmology] and in refusing to re-attach itself to them, robs itself both of the highest guarantee and the surest direction it could have; there is no longer anything valid in it except knowledge of details, and as soon as it seeks to rise one degree higher, it becomes dubious and vacillating.[29]

The Reign of Quantity also seeks to demonstrate the intimate connections between traditional metaphysics and the arts, crafts and sciences which are found in any traditional culture, and to show how many modern and profane sciences are really a kind of degenerated caricature of traditional sciences.[30] Such a demonstration turns largely on Guénon's explanation of the nature of symbolism and of the initiatic character of many traditional sciences.

There is in Guénon's work an adamantine quality, an austerity and inflexibility, and a combative tone as well as his "icy brilliance."[31] He was not one to coax, cajole or seduce his readers. Something of Guénon's unyielding posture is evinced in the following passage (remember that he is writing in the 1920s):

> ... hitherto, so far as we are aware, no one else beside ourselves has consistently expounded authentic Oriental ideas in the West; and we have done so ... without the slightest wish to propagandize or to popularize, and exclusively for the benefit of those who are able to understand the doctrines just as they stand, and not after they have been denatured on the plea of making them more readily acceptable ... [32]

Guénon's "inflexibility" is nothing other than an expression of his fierce commitment to the truth and it is precisely his refusal to compromise first principles which gives his work its power and integrity

It is worth noting that, long before Edward Said, Guénon was scathing about "orientalism," if by this term we mean the Western study of Eastern

28 This passage is quoted in G. Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 196; the source is not given but for a more extended discussion of precisely this contrast see R. Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, 37-50.

29 Quoted in W.T. Chan, "The Unity of East and West" in W.R. Inge et al, *Radhakrishnan: Comparative Studies in Philosophy Presented in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, 107-108. (This passage is from *East and West*).

30 See R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 14.

31 G. Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 183.

32 R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 103.

texts and doctrines using historicist and philological methods, driven by scholarly or antiquarian motives. In *East and West* he recognized that orientalism could become "an instrument in the service of national ambition," and reproached those scholars who were driven not by any intention of learning from the peoples of the East but rather by the (unacknowledged, perhaps unconscious) intent, "by brutal or insidious means, to convert them to [the West's] own way of thinking, and to preach to them."[33] But this was not the nub of the case:

> ... most orientalists are not and do not wish to be anything but scholars; so long as they confine themselves to historical or philological works it does not matter very much; ... their only real danger is the one which is common to all abuses of scholarship, and which consists in the spread of the "intellectual short-sightedness" that limits all knowledge to research after details ... But much more serious in our eyes is the influence exerted by those orientalists who profess to understand and to interpret the doctrines, and who make the most incredible travesty of them, while asserting sometimes that they understand them better than the Orientals themselves do ... and without ever dreaming of accepting the opinion of the authorized representatives of the civilizations they seek to study.[34]

After lambasting the European over-valuation of the Greco-Roman civilization and the way in which Eastern conceptions are often forced into classical moulds, Guénon takes aim at the German school of orientalists: Schopenhauer, Deussen, Oldenberg and Müller all come under heavy fire for their role in perpetrating Western misconceptions about Eastern traditions. However, Guénon reserves his most withering scorn for the "dreams and vagaries of the Theosophists, which are nothing but a tissue of gross errors, made still worse by methods of the lowest charlatanism."[35]

Like other traditionalists, Guénon did not perceive his work as any kind of essay in creativity or personal "originality," repeatedly emphasizing that in the metaphysical domain there was no room for "individualist considerations" of any kind. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas."[36] In the same spirit Coomaraswamy wrote,

> I am not a reformer or propagandist. I don't think for myself ... I am not putting forward any new or private doctrines or interpretations ... For me there are certain axioms, principles or values beyond question; my interest is not in thinking up new ones, but in the application of these that are.[37]

33 R. Guénon, *East and West*, 135, 156.
34 R. Guénon, *East and West*, 151-152.
35 R. Guénon, *East and West*, 157.
36 W. Perry, "The Man and His Witness," 7.
37 Letter to Herman Goetz, January 1947, *Selected Letters*, 33. See also his remarks in "The Seventieth Birthday Address," in *Selected Papers* 2, 434: "... the greatest thing I have learned is never to think for myself ... what I have sought is to understand what has been said, while taking no account of the 'inferior philosophers'."

For the traditionalists Guénon is the "providential interpreter of this age."[38] It was his role to remind a forgetful world, "'in a way that can be ignored but not refuted,' of first principles and to restore a lost sense of the Absolute."[39]

Ananda Coomaraswamy, Scholar and Dharma-Warrior

Ananda Coomaraswamy was a much more public figure than René Guénon. By the end of his life Coomaraswamy was thoroughly versed in the scriptures, mythology, doctrines and arts of many different cultures and traditions. He was an astonishingly erudite scholar, a recondite thinker and a distinguished linguist. He was a prolific writer, a full bibliography running to upwards of a thousand items on geological studies, art theory and history, linguistics and philology, social theory, psychology, mythology, folklore, religion and metaphysics.[40] He lived in three continents and maintained many contacts, both personal and professional, with scholars, antiquarians, artists, theologians and spiritual practitioners from all over the globe. The contributors to a memorial volume—some one hundred and fifty of them—included eminent scholars like A.L. Basham, Joseph Campbell, Heinrich Zimmer and V.S. Naravarne, writers such as T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley, art historians like Herman Goetz and Richard Ettinghausen, the distinguished Sanskritist Dr V. Raghavan—the list might go on.[41] Coomaraswamy was a widely known and influential figure. The contrast with Guénon is a marked one.

We can discern in Coomaraswamy's life and work three focal points which shaped his ideas and writings: a concern with social and political questions connected with the conditions of daily life and work, and with the problematic relationship of the present to the past and of the "East" to the "West"; a fascination with traditional arts and crafts which impelled an immense and ambitious scholarly enterprise; and thirdly, an ever-deeper preoccupation with religious and metaphysical questions which was resolved in a "unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition."[42] His early concerns took on a different character when, following his encounter with the work of Guénon, Coomaraswamy arrived at a thoroughly traditionalist understanding.

Born in Ceylon in 1877 of a Tamil father and an English mother, Coomaraswamy was brought up in England following the early death of his father. He was educated at Wycliffe College and at London University where he studied botany and geology. As part of his doctoral work Coomaraswamy carried out a scientific survey of the mineralogy of Ceylon and seemed poised for an academic career as a geologist. However, under pressure from

38 F. Schuon, "L'Oeuvre," quoted by M. Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom," 359.

39 W. Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History," 163.

40 The definitive bibliography is J. Crouch, *A Bibliography of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy* (2001).

41 See list of contributors in S.D.R. Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy, Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*, vii.

42 Roger Lipsey quoted in W. Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History," 206.

his experiences while engaged in his fieldwork, he became absorbed in a study of the traditional arts and crafts of Ceylon and of the social conditions under which they had been produced. In turn he became increasingly distressed by the corrosive effects of British colonialism.

In 1906 Coomaraswamy founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society of which he was the inaugural President and moving force. The Society addressed itself to the preservation and revival not only of traditional arts and crafts but also of the social values and customs which had helped to shape them. The Society also dedicated itself, in the words of its Manifesto, to discouraging "the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and custom."[43] Coomaraswamy called for a re-awakened pride in Ceylon's past and in her cultural heritage. The fact that he was half-English in no way blinkered his view of the impoverishment of national life brought by the British presence in both Ceylon and India. In both tone and substance the following passage is characteristic of Coomaraswamy in this early period:

> How different it might be if we Ceylonese were bolder and more independent, not afraid to stand on our own legs, and not ashamed of our nationalities. Why do we not meet the wave of European civilization on equal terms? ... Our Eastern civilization was here 2000 years ago; shall its spirit be broken utterly before the new commercialism of the West? Sometimes I think the Eastern spirit is not dead, but sleeping, and may yet play a greater part in the world's spiritual life.[44]

Prescient words indeed in 1905!

In the years between 1900 and 1913 Coomaraswamy moved backwards and forwards between Ceylon, India and England. In India he formed close relationships with the Tagore family and was involved in both the literary renaissance and the *swadeshi* movement.[45] All the while in the subcontinent he was researching the past, investigating arts and crafts, uncovering forgotten and neglected schools of religious and court art, writing scholarly and popular works, lecturing, and organizing bodies such as the Ceylon Social Reform Society and, in England, the India Society. If Guénon's disillusionment with contemporary civilization was first fashioned by French occultism, Coomaraswamy's was impelled by the contrast between the traditional and the modern industrial cultures of the two countries to which he belonged by birth.

In England he found his own social ideas anticipated in the work of William Blake, John Ruskin and William Morris, three of the foremost representatives of a fiercely eloquent and morally impassioned current of anti-industrialism.[46] Such figures had elaborated a biting critique of the ugliest

43 *Manifesto of the Ceylon Reform Society*, almost certainly written by Coomaraswamy, quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 22.

44 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Borrowed Plumes*, 1905, quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 18.

45 R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 75ff.

and most dehumanizing aspects of the industrial revolution and of the acquisitive commercialism which increasingly polluted both public and private life. They believed the new values and patterns of urbanization and industrialization were disfiguring the human spirit. These writers and others like Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold, protested vehemently against the conditions in which many were forced to carry out their daily work and living. Ruskin and Morris, in particular, were appalled by the debasing of standards of craftsmanship and of public taste. Coomaraswamy picked up a catch-phrase of Ruskin's which he was to mobilize again and again in his own writings: "industry without art is brutality."[47] This was more than a glib slogan and signals one of the key themes in Coomaraswamy's work. For many years he was to remain preoccupied with questions about the reciprocal relationships between the conditions of daily life and work, the art of a period, and the social and spiritual values which governed the civilization in question. The Arts and Crafts Movement of the Edwardian era was, in large measure, stimulated by the ideas of William Morris, the artist, designer, poet, medievalist and social theorist. Morris' work influenced Coomaraswamy decisively in this period and he involved himself with others in England who were trying to put some of Morris' ideas into practice. The Guild and School of Handicraft, with which Coomaraswamy had some connections, was a case in point.[48]

We can catch resonances from the work of the anti-industrialists in a passage such as this, written by Coomaraswamy in 1915:

> If the advocates of compulsory education were sincere, and by education meant education, they would be well aware that the first result of any real education would be to rear a race who would refuse point-blank the greater part of the activities offered by present day civilized existence ... life under Modern Western culture is not worth living, except for those strong enough and well enough equipped to maintain a perpetual guerilla warfare against all the purposes and idols of that civilization with a view to its utter transformation.[49]

This voices a concern with the purposes of education which was to remain with Coomaraswamy all his life. The tone of this passage is typical of Coomaraswamy's writings on social subjects in this period.

46 For a chronological account of Coomaraswamy's involvement in English social reform movements and of the development of his own ideas under English intellectual influences see R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 105ff.

47 R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 114. For a penetrating analysis of the anti-industrial movement in England see R. Williams, *Culture and Society*.

48 Lipsey offers a persuasive discussion of the influence of Morris. For other material on this phase of Coomaraswamy's life and his involvement in the Arts and Crafts Movement see W. Shewring, "Ananda Coomaraswamy and Eric Gill," and A. Crawford, "Ananda Coomaraswamy and C.R. Ashbee."

49 A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Love and Art," 1915, quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 105.

Later in life Coomaraswamy turned less often to explicitly social and political questions. By then he had become aware that "politics and economics, although they cannot be ignored, are the most external and least part of our problem."[50] However, he never surrendered the conviction that an urbanized and highly industrialized society controlled by materialistic values was profoundly inimical to human development. He was always ready to pull a barbed shaft from his literary quiver when provoked. As late as 1943 we find him writing to *The New English Weekly*, again on the subject of education, in terms no less caustic than those of 1915:

> We cannot pretend to culture until by the phrase "standard of living" we come to mean a qualitative standard ... Modern education is designed to fit us to take our place in the counting-house and at the chain-belt; a real culture breeds a race of men able to ask, What kind of work is worth doing? [51]

Coomaraswamy's significance as a social commentator is not fully revealed until his later work when the political and social insights from the early period in his life found their proper place within an all-embracing framework which allowed him to elaborate what Juan Adolpho Vasquez has called "a metaphysics of culture."[52] In the years before he moved to America he was more significant as a propagandist and educator than as a theorist. Ultimately Coomaraswamy's most important function as a social commentator lay in his insistence on relating social and political questions back to underlying religious and metaphysical principles.

The second refrain which sounds through Coomaraswamy's life is closely related to his interest in social questions and became the dominant theme of his public career—his work as an art historian. From the outset Coomaraswamy's interest in art was controlled by much more than either antiquarian or "aesthetic" considerations. For him the most humble folk art and the loftiest religious creations alike were an outward expression not only of the sensibilities of those who created them but of the whole civilization in which they were nurtured. There was nothing of the *art nouveau* slogan of "art for art's sake" in Coomaraswamy's outlook. His interest in traditional arts and crafts, from a humble pot to a Hindu temple, was always governed by the conviction that something immeasurably precious and vitally important was disappearing under the onslaught of modernism in its many different guises. As his biographer remarks, "... history of art was never for him either a light question—one that had only to do with pleasures—or a question of scholarship for its own sake, but rather a question of setting right what had gone amiss partly through ignorance of the past."[53] Coomaraswamy's achievement as an art historian can perhaps best be understood in respect of

50 A.K. Coomaraswamy quoted in D. Riepe, *Indian Philosophy and Its Impact on American Thought*, 126.

51 Letter to *The New English Weekly*, April 1943, *Selected Letters*, 293.

52 See Juan Adolpho Vasquez, "A Metaphysics of Culture."

53 R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 20.

three of the major tasks which he undertook: the "rehabilitation" of Asian art in the eyes of Europeans and Asians alike; the massive work of scholarship which he pursued as curator of the Indian Section of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the penetration and explanation of traditional views of art and their relationship to philosophy, religion and metaphysics.

In assessing Coomaraswamy's achievement it needs to be remembered that the conventional attitude of the Edwardian era towards the art of Asia was, at best, condescending, and at worst, frankly contemptuous. Asian art was often dismissed as "barbarous," "second-rate" and "inferior" and there was a good deal of foolish talk about "eight-armed monsters" and the like.[54] In short, there was, in England at least, an almost total ignorance of the sacred iconographies of the East. Such an artistic illiteracy was coupled with a similar incomprehension of traditional philosophy and religion, and buttressed by all manner of Eurocentric assumptions. Worse still was the fact that such attitudes had infected the Indian intelligentsia, exposed as it was to Western education and influences.

Following the early days of his fieldwork in Ceylon, Coomaraswamy set about dismantling these prejudices through an affirmation of the beauty, integrity and spiritual density of traditional art in Ceylon and India and, later, in other parts of Asia. He was bent on the task of demonstrating the existence of an artistic heritage at least the equal of Europe's. He not only wrote and spoke and organized tirelessly to educate the British but he scourged the Indian intelligentsia for being duped by assumptions of European cultural superiority. In studies like *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), and his earliest collection of essays, *The Dance of Shiva* (1918), Coomaraswamy combated the prejudices of the age and reaffirmed traditional understandings of Indian art. He revolutionized several specific fields of art history, radically changed others. His work on Sinhalese arts and crafts and on Rajput painting, though they can now be seen as formative in the light of his later work on Buddhist iconography and on Indian, Platonic and Christian theories of art, were nevertheless early signs of a stupendous scholarship. His influence was not only felt in the somewhat rarefied domain of art scholarship but percolated into other scholarly fields and eventually must have had some influence on popular attitudes in Ceylon, India, England and America.[55] As Meyer Schapiro observed,

> He was one of the luminaries of scholarship from whom we have all learned. And by the immense range of his studies and his persistent questioning of

54 R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 60-61, and W. Perry, "The Bollingen Coomaraswamy," 214.

55 See the following essays in S.D.R. Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy, Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*: B. Heiman, "Indian Art and Its Transcendence," 24-26; K.C. Kamaliah, "Ananda Coomaraswamy's Assessment of Dravidian Civilization and Culture," 43-52; A. Ranganathan, "Ananda Coomaraswamy: Confluence of East and West," 53-58; B.N. Goswamy, "Ananda Coomaraswamy as a Historian of Rajput Painting," 75-83; M.S. Randhava, "Rediscovery of Kangra Painting," 201-204.

> the accepted values, he gave us an example of intellectual seriousness, rare among scholars today.[56]

As a Curator at the Boston Museum Coomaraswamy performed a mighty labor in classifying, cataloguing and explaining thousands of items of oriental art. Through his professional work, his writings, lectures and personal associations Coomaraswamy left an indelible imprint on the work of many American galleries and museums and influenced a wide range of curators, art historians, orientalists and critics—Stella Kramrisch, Walter Andrae, and Heinrich Zimmer to name a few of the more well-known.[57] Zimmer wrote of Coomaraswamy: "the only man in my field who, whenever I read a paper of his, gives me a genuine inferiority complex."[58]

Traditional art, in Coomaraswamy's view, was always directed towards a twin purpose: a daily utility, towards what he was fond of calling "the satisfaction of present needs," and to the preservation and transmission of moral values and spiritual teachings derived from the tradition in which it appeared. A Tibetan *tanka*, a medieval cathedral, a Red Indian utensil, a Javanese puppet, a Hindu deity image—in such artifacts and creations Coomaraswamy sought a symbolic vocabulary. The intelligibility of traditional arts and crafts, he insisted, does not depend on a more or less precarious *recognition*, as does modern art, but on *legibility*. Traditional art does not deal in the private vision of the artist but in a symbolic language.[59] By contrast modern art, which from a traditionalist perspective includes Renaissance and, generally speaking, all post-Renaissance art, is divorced from higher values, tyrannized by the mania for "originality," controlled by aesthetic and sentimental considerations, and drawn from the subjective resources of the individual artist rather than from the well-springs of tradition. The comparison, needless to say, does not reflect well on modern art! An example:

> Our artists are "emancipated" from any obligation to eternal verities, and have abandoned to tradesmen the satisfaction of present needs. Our abstract art is not an iconography of transcendental forms but the realistic picture of a disintegrated mentality.[60]

During the late 1920s Coomaraswamy's life and work somewhat altered their trajectory. The collapse of his third marriage, ill-health and a growing awareness of death, an impatience with the constrictions of purely academic scholarship, and the influence of René Guénon all cooperated to deepen

56 Letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy, 12th September 1947, quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 246.

57 See R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 206-231, and A. Ripley Hall, "The Keeper of the Indian Collection," 106-124. This article includes a bibliography of Coomaraswamy's writings for the bulletin of the Museum.

58 Zimmer quoted in W. McGuire, "Zimmer and the Mellens," 38.

59 See A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*.

60 A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Symptom, Diagnosis and Regimen" in *Selected Papers 1*, 316-317.

Coomaraswamy's interest in spiritual and metaphysical questions.[61] He became more austere in his personal lifestyle, partially withdrew from the academic and social worlds in which he had moved freely over the last decade, and addressed himself to the understanding and explication of traditional metaphysics, especially those of classical India and pre-Renaissance Europe. Coomaraswamy remarked in one of his letters that "my indoctrination with the *Philosophia Perennis* is primarily Oriental, secondarily Mediaeval, and thirdly classic."[62] His later work is densely textured with references to Plato and Plotinus, Augustine and Aquinas, Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics, to Sankara and Lao-tse and Nagarjuna. He also explored folklore and mythology since these too carried profound teachings. Coomaraswamy remained the consummate scholar but his work took on a more urgent nature after 1932. He spoke of his "vocation"—he was not one to use such words lightly—as "research in the field of the significance of the universal symbols of the *Philosophia Perennis*" rather than as "one of apology for or polemic on behalf of doctrines."[63]

The influence of Guénon was decisive. Coomaraswamy discovered Guénon's writings through Heinrich Zimmer some time in the late 20s and, a few years later, wrote,

> ... no living writer in modern Europe is more significant than René Guénon, whose task it has been to expound the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the essential foundation of every past culture, and which represents the indispensable basis for any civilization deserving to be so-called.[64]

Coomaraswamy told one of his friends that he and Guénon were "entirely in agreement on metaphysical principles" which, of course, did not preclude some divergences of opinion over the applications of these principles on the phenomenal plane.[65]

The vintage Coomaraswamy of the later years is to be found in his masterly works on Vedanta and on the Catholic scholastics and mystics. Some of his work is labyrinthine and not easy of access. It is often laden with a mass of technical detail and with linguistic and philological subtleties which test the patience of some readers. Of his own methodology as an exponent of metaphysics Coomaraswamy wrote,

> We write from a strictly orthodox point of view ... endeavoring to speak with mathematical precision, but never employing words of our own, or making any affirmation for which authority could not be cited by chapter and verse; in this way making our technique characteristically Indian.[66]

61 See R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 161-175. On Coomaraswamy's move from "descriptive iconography" towards metaphysics see his letter to Herman Goetz, June 1939, *Selected Letters*, 26-27.

62 Letter to Artemus Packard, May 1941, *Selected Letters*, 299.

63 A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality," 134.

64 Quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 170.

65 W. Perry, "The Man and the Witness," 5.

66 Quoted in V.S. Naravarne, "Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Critical Appreciation," 206.

Sometimes one wishes the chapter and verse documentation was not quite so overwhelming! Coomaraswamy was much more scrupulous than Guénon in this respect, the latter sometimes ignoring scholarly protocols at the cost of exposing some of his claims to academic criticism.

Coomaraswamy's later writings demand close attention from anyone seriously interested in the subjects about which he wrote. There is no finer exegesis of traditional Indian metaphysics than is to be found in Coomaraswamy's later works. His work on the Platonic, Christian and Indian conceptions of sacred art is also unrivalled. Roger Lipsey has performed an invaluable service in bringing some of Coomaraswamy's finest essays on these subjects together in *Coomaraswamy, Vol II: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*. Special mention should be made of "The Vedanta and Western Tradition," "Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance," "Recollection, Indian and Platonic," "On the One and Only Transmigrant" and "On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology." But it hardly matters what one picks up from the later period: all his mature work is stamped with rare scholarship, elegant expression and a depth of understanding which makes most of the other scholarly work on the same subjects look vapid and superficial. Of his later books three in particular deserve much wider attention: *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (1939), *Hinduism and Buddhism* (1943) and *Time and Eternity* (1947). *The Bugbear of Literacy* (1979) (first published in 1943 as *Am I my Brother's Keeper?*) and two posthumous collections of some of his most interesting and more accessible essays, *Sources of Wisdom* (1981) and *What is Civilization?* (1989), offer splendid starting-points for uninitiated readers.

From this brief sketch it will be clear enough that Coomaraswamy was a man of wide interests and achievements. From a traditionalist point of view and in the context of our present study we can unhesitatingly ratify Coomaraswamy's own words: "I have little doubt that my later work, developed out of and necessitated by my earlier works on the arts and dealing with Indian philosophy and Vedic exegesis, is really the most mature and most important part of my work."[67] Furthermore, this work was not fuelled by a sterile academic ideal but by a real existential engagement. As Coomaraswamy remarked,

> The passionless reason of ... "objective" scholarship, applied to the study of "what men have believed," is only a sort of frivolity, in which the real problem, that of knowing what should be believed, is evaded.[68]

A tribute from his friend Eric Gill, the English designer and writer, will leave us at an appropriate point to conclude this introduction:

67 Coomaraswamy quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 248.
68 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 22.

> Others have written the truth about life and religion and man's work. Others have written good clear English. Others have had the gift of witty exposition. Others have understood the metaphysics of Christianity and others have understood the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism. Others have understood the true significance of erotic drawings and sculptures. Others have seen the relationships of the true and the good and the beautiful. Others have had apparently unlimited learning. Others have loved; others have been kind and generous. But I know of no one else in whom all these gifts and all these powers have been combined ... I believe that no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding.[69]

We can hardly doubt that the life and work of this "warrior for dharma"[70] was a precious gift to all those interested in the ways of the spirit.

Frithjof Schuon and the *Religio Perennis* in East and West

With the person of Frithjof Schuon we move back into the shadows of a deliberate anonymity.[71] Schuon was born of German parents in Basle in 1907. He was schooled in both French and German but left school at sixteen to work as a textile designer in Paris. From an early age he devoted himself to a study of philosophy, religion and metaphysics, reading the classical and modern works of European philosophy, and the sacred literatures of the East. Amongst the Western sources Plato and Eckhart left a profound impression while the *Bhagavad Gita* was his favorite Eastern reading.[72] Even before moving to Paris Schuon came into contact with the writings of René Guénon "which served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilization while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications."[73]

From his earliest years Schuon was also fascinated by traditional art, especially that of Japan and the Far East. In an unusual personal reference in one of his works he tells us of a Buddha figure in an ethnographical museum. It was a traditional representation in gilded wood and flanked by two statues of the Bodhisattvas Seishi and Kwannon. The encounter with this "overwhelming embodiment of an infinite victory of the Spirit" Schuon sums up in the phrase "*veni, vidi, victus sum.*"[74] One commentator has drawn attention to the

69 E. Gill, *Autobiography*, 174.

70 M. Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds," 187.

71 See B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist.* Fragmentary information can also be found in *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* and in S.H. Nasr, "The Biography of Frithjof Schuon," 1-6.

72 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 2.

73 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 2. See also W. Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition," 14-16.

74 F. Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, 121. See also B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 2.

importance of aesthetic intuition in accounting for Schuon's extraordinary understanding of traditional religious and social forms: "It suffices for him to see ... an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of 'chain-reaction,' a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual and psychological ideas."[75] This may seem an extravagant claim but those who have read Schuon's work will not doubt the gift to which it testifies.

After working for a time in Mulhouse, in Alsace, Schuon underwent a year and a half of military service before returning to his design work in Paris. There, in 1930, his interest in Islam led him to a close study of Arabic, first with a Syrian Jew and afterwards at the Paris mosque, and to his formal commitment to Islam.[76] In the 30s Schuon several times visited North Africa, spending time in Algeria, Morocco and Egypt where he met René Guénon, with whom he had been corresponding for some years. In many respects Schuon's work was to be an elaboration of principles first given public expression by Guénon. Schuon's direct master was not Guénon, who never took on the role of spiritual teacher, but Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawi, the Algerian Sufi sage and founder of the 'Alawi order.[77] Schuon has written of this modern saint:

> ... someone who represents in himself ... the idea which for hundreds of years has been the life-blood of that civilization [the Islamic]. To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-20th century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch.[78]

The contemplative climate of India also held a strong attraction for Schuon but a visit to the subcontinent was cut short by the outbreak of World War II which obliged him to return to Europe. Schuon served for some months in the French army before being captured by the Germans. His father had been a native of southern Germany while his mother had come from German-Alsatian stock. Such a background ensured some measure of freedom for Schuon but when the Nazis threatened to forcibly enlist Alsatians in the German army he seized an opportunity to escape to Switzerland. He was briefly imprisoned before being granted asylum. He settled in Lausanne and, some years later, took out Swiss nationality.[79]

75 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 1.

76 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 3.

77 See M. Lings *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, and M. Valsan, "Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alawi, 1869-1934." It has been wrongly suggested that Schuon was a "disciple" of Guénon and/or Coomaraswamy. See, for instance, E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 262, and R.C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times*, 36, fn2. Further, it needs to be remembered that "To follow Guénon is not to follow the man, but to follow the light of traditional truth ..."; B. Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions," 160-161.

78 F. Schuon, "Rahimahu Llah," *Cahiers du Sud*, August-September 1935, quoted in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 116. (There is a moving portrait of the Shaikh by Schuon, facing page 160.)

79 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 3.

In 1949 Schuon married Catherine Feer, the daughter of a Swiss diplomat. It was she who introduced him to the beauties of the Swiss Alps. Schuon's love of nature, which runs through his work like a haunting melody, was further deepened during two periods which he and his wife spent with the Plains Indians of North America. "For Schuon, virgin nature carries a message of eternal truth and primordial reality, and to plunge oneself therein is to rediscover a dimension of the soul which in modern man has become atrophied."[80] The Schuons had previously developed friendly contacts with visiting Indians in Paris and Brussels in the 1950s. During their first visit to North America in 1959, the Schuons were officially adopted into the Red Cloud family of the Lakota tribe, that branch of the Sioux nation from which came the revered "medicine-man" Black Elk.[81] As well as making visits to America Schuon traveled in North Africa and the Middle East, maintaining on-going friendships with representatives of all the great religious traditions. Earlier he lived in reclusive circumstances in Switzerland but spent his later years in America until his death in May, 1998.

Schuon's published work forms an imposing corpus and covers a staggering range of religious and metaphysical subjects without any of the superficialities and simplifications which we normally expect from someone covering such a boundless terrain. His works on specific religious traditions have commanded respect from scholars and practitioners within the traditions in question. As well as publishing over twenty books he was a prolific contributor to journals such as *Études Traditionnelles*, *Islamic Quarterly*, *Tomorrow*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* and *Sophia Perennis*. Almost his entire oeuvre is now available in English translation.[82]

Schuon's works are all governed by an unchanging set of metaphysical principles. They exhibit nothing of a "development" or "evolution" but are, rather, re-statements of the same principles from different vantage points and brought to bear on divergent phenomena. More so than with either Guénon or Coomaraswamy, one feels that Schuon's vision was complete from the outset. The term "erudition" is not quite appropriate: Schuon not only knows "about" an encyclopedic range of religious manifestations and sapiential traditions but seems to understand them in a way which, for want of a better word, we can only call intuitive. Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts the matter this way:

> If Guénon was the master expositor of metaphysical doctrines and Coomaraswamy the peerless scholar and connoisseur of Oriental art who began his exposition of metaphysics through recourse to the language of

80 B. Perry, *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist*, 6.

81 For some account of the Schuons' personal experiences with the Plains Indians see F. Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, Parts 2 & 3. Schuon, Coomaraswamy and Joseph Epes Brown, and the artist Paul Goble, have all been at the forefront of efforts to preserve the precious spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians. See R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, 227-228.

82 For a full bibliography of Schuon's writings up to 1990 see *Religion of the Heart*, ed. S.H. Nasr & W. Stoddart, 299-327.

> artistic forms, Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge.[83]

Several of Schuon's books are devoted to the Islamic and Christian traditions. Nasr, himself an eminent Islamicist, wrote of *Understanding Islam*, "I believe his work to be the most outstanding ever written in a European language on why Muslims believe in Islam and why Islam offers to man all that he needs religiously and spiritually."[84] Nasr has been no less generous in commending later works.[85] Whilst all of Schuon's works have a Sufic fragrance his work has by no means been restricted to the Islamic heritage. Two major works focus on Hinduism and Buddhism: *Language of the Self* (1959) and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (1969).[86] He also refers frequently to Red Indian spirituality, to the Chinese tradition and to Judaism. His writings on the spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians have been collected, together with reproductions of some of his paintings, in *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (1990).

All of Schuon's work is concerned with a re-affirmation of traditional metaphysical principles, with an explication of the esoteric dimensions of religion, with the penetration of mythological and religious forms, and with the critique of a modernism which is indifferent to the principles which inform all traditional wisdoms. His general position was defined in his first work to appear in English, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953), a work of which T.S. Eliot remarked, "I have met with no more impressive work on the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion."[87] *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (1954) is a collection of aphoristic essays including studies of Vedanta and sacred art, and a meditation on the spiritual virtues. *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (1959), *Logic and Transcendence* (1976) and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (1981) are largely given over to extended and explicit discussions of metaphysical principles. Schuon suggested some years ago that *Logic and Transcendence* was his most representative and inclusive work. That distinction is perhaps now shared with *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* which includes Schuon's most deliberate explanation of the nature of esotericism,[88] and with *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (1986) which is a masterly work of metaphysical synthesis.

Stations of Wisdom (1961) is directed mainly towards an exploration of certain religious and spiritual modalities but includes "Orthodoxy and

83 S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 107.

84 See S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 10.

85 See his Prefaces to F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*.

86 A revised and enlarged version of the latter was published by World Wisdom Books in 1993 as *Treasures of Buddhism*.

87 Cover of Harper & Row edition of 1975.

88 Schuon's translators often use the word "esoterism"; I have preferred "esotericism." Schuon's comment about *Logic and Transcendence* is recorded in Whitall Perry's review of *Logic and Transcendence*, 250.

Intellectuality," an essay of paramount importance in understanding the traditionalist position. *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (1965) includes a range of essays on such subjects as the Hellenist-Christian "dialogue," shamanism, monasticism and the *religio perennis*. Schuon's most recent works are *To Have a Center* (1990), *Roots of the Human Condition* (1991), *The Play of Masks* (1992) and *The Transfiguration of Man* (1995).

The two Schuon books most directly addressed to themes which bear on our present study are *Language of the Self*, concentrating on aspects of the Indian spiritual heritage, and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* which, leaving aside the works of Marco Pallis, is the only extended traditionalist work on Buddhism. Dr. V. Raghavan wrote the Foreword to the former:

> 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 ... has contributed in a unique way to the true understanding of Hinduism in the West ... writings different from [those] of the Orientalists ... but [which] may be considered the consummation of the work which these "orientalists" had done since the 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 *apara vidya*, while the class of writings dealt with here may be deemed the *para vidya* ... Nothing is more significant or has climaxed this effort in a more befitting manner than the fact that His Holiness Sri Sankaracarya, Jagadguru on the Kanci Kamakoti Pitha, has been pleased to accept the dedication of this book to him; *the authenticity and orthodoxy of Schuon's exposition stand in need of no further testimony.*[89]

The book includes essays on the principles of Hindu orthodoxy, the Vedanta, yoga, the originality of Buddhism, and sacred art. Schuon also explicates the doctrines and principles which inform the Indian caste system in what is, along with Coomaraswamy's essay "The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality,"[90] undoubtedly its most authoritative defense by a Western writer. "Self-Knowledge and the Western Seeker" is an essay of special interest in our current context. Here we shall limit ourselves to quoting a few highly suggestive passages. Firstly, concerning the disenchantment with Christianity amongst many who are thereby attracted to the wisdom traditions of the East:

> ... one has to face the fact that many people of European and therefore Christian ancestry have been caused to react strongly, for reasons with which one can often sympathize, against the sentimentality and unintelligence that have increasingly invaded their own traditional home during recent centuries. Those who have not let themselves succumb, without more ado, to the prevailing religious indifference, have almost inevitably been drawn to

89 Dr. V. Raghavan, Foreword to F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, ix-x (italics mine).

90 This is one of Coomaraswamy's late essays, written sometime between 1944 and his death, and was not published until it appeared in the revised and expanded *The Bugbear of Literacy* (1979).

> look in an easterly direction for a corrective to the ills they deplore, with a strong bias in favor of the sapiential doctrines rather than those which, having a bhaktic character, reminded them too obviously of Christian modes of expression now grown suspect in their eyes, often mistakenly so ... these seekers have moreover awakened to the fact, familiar to every true Hindu, that 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 and requiring for its effective communication, the presence of a guru ...[91]

Such aspirants are often impatient (a sign of the very ignorance which they are seeking to remedy) and insufficiently aware of the need to integrate certain "psychic and physical elements" before any real spiritual growth can proceed. This is matched by a certain lack of prudence on the part of Eastern teachers who in other respects might be thoroughly orthodox in their teachings. This circumstance is exacerbated by the fact that modern modes of communication (printing presses, mass media, the internet) facilitate the publicizing of the teacher and the teachings in ways which all too easily lead to the personal adulation of the teacher and the "distortion or dilution" of the doctrines. All too often the end result is a kind of "spiritual demagoguery." Furthermore, a purely mental acceptance of the teachings, unaccompanied by any deeper transformations, will often lead the Westerner to "... an intellectual automatism and all sorts of vices, such as pride, pretentiousness, obstinacy, mental petrifaction, dialectical monomania and a lack of a sense of the sacred."[92] Who can have failed to meet the type of Western "seeker" to which Schuon here refers? Schuon goes on to write of the dangers arising out of the different spiritual climates of India and the West, and the divergent spiritual temperaments to which the religious traditions are addressed:

> We do not say that a Jew or a Christian can never follow a Hindu *sadhana*; we say that, if they follow it, they must ... take account of their own mental make-up. They are neither Hindus nor Brahmins [this state being only accessible by birthright]; *jnana* is more dangerous for them than for the men belonging to the elite of India. Being Europeans, they think too much, which gives them an appearance of intelligence; in reality their thought, more often than not, is basically passionate and has no contemplative serenity whatsoever ...[93]

Herein we have at least a partial explanation of the well-attested phenomena of well-educated, articulate and clever Western intellectuals who have, apparently, a thorough *mental* grasp of the most profound teachings but who, whatever their pretensions, have undergone none of that alchemical transmuta-

91 F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 48.
92 F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 51.
93 F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 55.

tion of the soul which leads to wisdom and saintliness. Western seekers cannot too often be reminded that

> If metaphysics is a sacred thing, that means it could not be ... limited to the framework of the play of the mind. It is illogical and dangerous to talk of metaphysics without being preoccupied with the moral concomitances it requires, the criteria of which are, for man, his behavior in relation to God and to his neighbor.[94]

*

Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon have played different but complementary roles in the development of traditionalism, each fulfilling a function corresponding to their distinct sensibilities and gifts. Guénon occupies a special position by virtue of being the first to articulate the fundamental metaphysical and cosmological principles through which the *sophia perennis* might be rediscovered and expressed anew in the West. We have already noted Schuon's recognition of Guénon as a "providential interpreter, at least on the doctrinal level" for the modern West. In a like sense Laurant refers to Guénon's "hieratic role."[95] Guénon's critique of the "reign of quantity" also provides the platform from which more detailed criticisms might be made by later traditionalists. His reaction to modernism was integral to his role and constitutes a kind of clearing of the ground.

Coomaraswamy brought to the study of traditional metaphysics, sacred art and religious culture an aesthetic sense and a scholarly aptitude not found in Guénon. The Frenchman had, as Reynolds observes, "no great sensitivity for human cultures."[96] Coomaraswamy, in a sense, brings the principles about which Guénon wrote, down to a more human level. His work exhibits much more of a sense of history, and a feel for the diverse and concrete circumstances of human experience. There is also a sense of personal presence in Coomaraswamy's writings which is absent in Guénon's work which, to some readers at least, must appear somewhat abstract and rarefied. As Gai Eaton put it, to move from Guénon's work to Coomaraswamy's is to "... descend into a far kindlier climate, while remaining in the same country ... The icy glitter is replaced by a warmer glow, the attitude of calm disdain towards all things modern by a more human indignation."[97] Whitall Perry contrasts their roles through a metaphor which each would have appreciated:

> Guénon was like the vertical axis of a cross, fixed with mathematical precision on immutable realities and their immediate applications in the domain of cosmological sciences; whereas Coomaraswamy was the horizontal complement, expanding these truths over the vast field of arts, cultures,

94 F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 173.
95 J.P. Laurant: "Le problème de René Guénon," 63.
96 P.L. Reynolds, "René Guénon," 6.
97 G. Eaton, *The Richest Vein*, 199.

> mythologies and symbolisms: metaphysical truth on the one hand, universal beauty on the other.[98]

Schuon combined in himself something of the qualities of both Guénon and Coomaraswamy. His work includes psychic, moral and aesthetic dimensions which are missing from Guénon's writings. As Jean Tourniac has remarked

> Another writer, M. Frithjof Schuon, for his part, had to develop the spiritual exegesis of traditional forms in a series of works of a different kind to those of Guénon, works of high color—this word is not excessive, for beauty and color play a distinctive role in the work of F. Schuon—more "Christly" than those of Guénon which essentially hold themselves to defining the mechanisms of invariable principles.[99]

Schuon's work has a symmetry and an inclusive quality not found in the work of his precursors; there is a balance and fullness which give his writings something of the quality of a spiritual therapy. In this sense Schuon does not simply write about the perennial philosophy but gives it a direct and fresh expression proportioned to the needs of the age.

The contrast with Guénon can be clearly seen in the style and tone of language. If Guénon's expositions can be called "mathematical," Schuon's might be described as "musical," this, of course, not implying any deficiency in precision but rather the addition of a dimension of Beauty. As S.H. Nasr has observed, "His authoritative tone, clarity of expression and an 'alchemy' which transmutes human language to enable it to present the profoundest truths, make of it a unique expression of the *sophia perennis* ..."[100] Marco Pallis refers to what he rather loosely calls "the gift of tongues": "the ability, that is to say, both to speak and to understand the various dialects through which the Spirit has chosen to communicate itself ..."[101]

Writing of the work of Guénon and Coomaraswamy, Whitall Perry suggested that

> The complement and copestone of this witness remained to be realized in the message of Schuon, coming freshly from the sphere of the *Religio Perennis*, in contradistinction to the *Philosophia Perennis* which was the legacy of the other two. His was the third pole, needed to complete the triangle and integrate the work on an operative basis.[102]

There is a nobility of spirit in Schuon's work which makes it something much more than a challenging and arresting body of ideas: it is a profoundly moving *theoria* which reverberates in the deepest recesses of one's being. He is

98 W. Perry, "The Man and the Witness," 7.

99 J. Tourniac, *Propos sur René Guénon*, 16, quoted in P.L. Reynolds, "Rene Guénon," 13 (Translation by Pamela Oldmeadow).

100 S.H. Nasr, Preface to F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, viii.

101 M. Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain*, 78.

102 W. Perry, "The Man and the Witness," 7.

the most sublime metaphysician of the age. It is not without reason that Whitall Perry has recently compared Schuon's work to that of Plato and Sankara.[103] In Schuon's work we find the richest, the most authoritative and the most resonant expression of the *sophia perennis* in modern times. One might borrow the following words, applied to Meister Eckhart but equally true of Schuon:

> Being wholly traditional in the truest sense, and therefore perennial, the doctrine he expounds will never cease to be contemporary and always accessible to those who, naturally unsatisfied with mere living, desire to know how to live, regardless of time or place.[104]

Other Traditionalists

Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984)

In the previous chapter we made some note of the work of another leading traditionalist, Marco Pallis. We will bring this one to its conclusions with some brief notes on the other principal figures. In recent times the most distinguished exponent of traditional thought, after Schuon, was Titus Burckhardt.[105] Born in Florence in 1908, he was the son of the Swiss sculptor Carl Burckhardt, and a member of a patrician family of Basle. His friendship with Frithjof Schuon went back to their school days together. Although Burckhardt first followed in his father's footsteps as a sculptor and illustrator, he was from childhood attracted to medieval and Oriental art. This early interest led Burckhardt to a theoretical study of medieval and Eastern doctrines and awoke in him a realization of the metaphysical or intellectual principles that govern all traditional forms. For Burckhardt, the relationship between art and metaphysics finds perfect expression in the words of Plato: "Beauty is the Splendor of Truth." In the same vein a medieval artist had declared "*ars sine scientia nihil*" ("art without science is nothing").[106] Following the same line of thought Burckhardt has shown how, in a traditional society, every art is a science, and every science an art. Given that the contemplation of God is the "art of arts" and the "science of sciences," one can see from the foregoing how intellectuality and spirituality are but two sides of the same coin, and how each is wholly indispensable. Without true intellectuality there can only be heresy; and without true spirituality there can only be hypocrisy. This, in a nutshell, is the doctrine which Burckhardt exemplified in his life's work. He died in Lausanne in 1984.

103 W. Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition," 15.

104 C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, xv.

105 For biographical information on Burckhardt see W. Stoddart: "Right Hand of Truth" and M. Lings, "Titus Burckhardt," both in the Titus Burckhardt Memorial Issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 16:1 & 2, 1984.

106 See A.K. Coomaraswamy, "*Ars Sine Scientia Nihil*" in *Selected Papers 1*, 229.

Burckhardt's most significant writings on Eastern subjects appear in *Sacred Art in East and West* (1967) and in his collected essays, *Mirror of the Intellect* (1987), edited by William Stoddart. Burckhardt's work is in one sense a prolongation of that of Frithjof Schuon, but at every turn it also bears witness to his own spiritual originality and imposing gifts. Primarily a metaphysician, his works on sacred art and alchemy also testify to his gift for elucidating the cosmological principles that inform traditional arts and sciences.

Martin Lings (b. 1909)

The English traditionalist, Martin Lings, was born in Burnage, Lancashire, in 1909.[107] After studying English at Oxford he was appointed Lecturer in Anglo-Saxon at the University of Kaunas. As with many of his fellow-traditionalists, an interest in Islam took him traveling to the Middle East and North Africa. A trip to Egypt in 1939 brought an appointment as Lecturer in Shakespeare at Cairo University. He spent many years in Cairo where he had a close association with Guénon. In 1952 Lings returned to England to take out a doctorate in Arabic (in which he was already fluent) at London University. He worked for many years at the British Museum where he was Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books. He is an authority on Koranic manuscripts and calligraphy. As well as his expertise in the field of Islamic studies Lings brings to traditionalism a cultivated English sensibility and a gift for expressing complex truths in simple language.

Whitall Perry (b. 1920)

The most authoritative traditionalist of American background is Whitall Perry.[108] He was born near Boston in 1920. His early intellectual interests included Platonism and Vedanta. He traveled in the Middle and Far East both before and after World War II with a brief interlude of study at Harvard University. He was one of several Harvard students who came under Coomaraswamy's influence in the 1940s, Joseph Epes Brown being another. Between 1946 and 1952 Perry and his wife lived in Egypt, at which time he developed close ties with René Guénon, after whose death he moved with his family to Switzerland. He was already a close associate of Frithjof Schuon with whom he returned to the United States in 1980.

Coomaraswamy once expressed the view that the time was ripe for someone well versed in the world's great religious traditions and fluent in several languages to compile an encyclopedic anthology drawing together the spiritual wisdom of the ages in a single volume. This task was to be accomplished by Whitall Perry whose seventeen-year labor bore fruit in *A Treasury of*

107 Information on Lings taken from his own publications.

108 Material on Perry drawn from his own publications, especially "The Man and the Witness" and Marco Pallis' Foreword to W. Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 7-11.

Traditional Wisdom (1971). This is a work of singular importance. In his Introduction Perry invites the reader

> to enter upon a spiritual journey. In this book he will encounter the heritage he shares in common with all humanity, in what is essentially timeless and enduring and pertinent to his final ends. Out of this myriad mosaic of material emerges a pattern of the human personality in the cosmos that is unerringly consistent, clear and struck through with a resonance infallible in its ever renewed reverberations of the one same Reality.[109]

Thousands of quotations have been woven into an immense tapestry whose threads have been drawn from all the major religious and esoteric traditions. Each section of the book is introduced with a concise and acute commentary, usually referring to the works of Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon to whom Perry acknowledges a debt of "profound gratitude" and "whose several roles," Perry tells us, "have been altogether indispensable in the formation of this work." While performing a valuable service in bringing the work of "the great triumvirate" to the attention of a wider audience Perry has himself discharged an awesome labor in pulling together the many strands of traditional wisdom between the covers of a single volume in which the concrete reality of the *sophia perennis*, axiomatic in traditionalism, is revealed and documented. It would, of course, be impossible to uncover every manifestation of the Primordial Wisdom in all its plenitude but Perry has surely come close to such an ideal. It is a monumental and profoundly impressive achievement in the light of which the only remotely comparable book, Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), pales into insignificance.[110]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933)

An eminent Islamicist and of the living traditionalists the most widely known in academic circles, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, was born in Tehran.[111] As a young man he studied physics and the history of science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at Harvard University. He rapidly established himself as an authority on Islamic philosophy and science, and on Sufism. In 1958 he became Professor of Science and Philosophy at Tehran University and in 1964-65 occupied the first Aga Khan Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University at Beirut. Nasr became Chancellor of Aryamehr University in 1972 and was also the Founder President of the Imperial

109 W. Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 19.

110 We shall have more to say about Huxley's idiosyncratic view of the perennial philosophy in Chapter 10.

111 Information about Nasr taken from notes accompanying his own publications, from Notes on Contributors in Y. Ibish & P.L. Wilson, *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, 472, and from Notes on Contributors in several journals. A useful biographical sketch can be found in W. Chittick (ed), *The Works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr Through His Fortieth Birthday*. See also William Stoddart's Introduction to T. Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 3-9.

Iranian Academy of Philosophy which published the traditionalist journal *Sophia Perennis*.

Since the political changes in Iran Nasr has lived in the U.S.A. and after some years in the Religious Studies Department at Temple University is now the University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. Nasr has lectured extensively not only in the U.S.A. but in Europe, the Middle East, Pakistan, India, Japan and Australia. He has published widely, being the author of some two dozen books and a frequent contributor to Islamic and traditionalist journals,

The hallmarks of Nasr's work are his rigorous scholarly methodology, his encyclopedic erudition about all matters Islamic, a robustness of critical thought, and a sustained clarity of expression. His most important works fall into three groups: those concerned with Islamic science and philosophy which include *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968), and *Islamic Science: An Illustrated History* (1976); works dealing with Islam more generally or with the mystical traditions of Sufism; and thirdly, books in which specifically modern problems are investigated in the light of traditional metaphysics: *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (1968), *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (1976), and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996). His Gifford Lectures of 1981 were subsequently published under the title *Knowledge and the Sacred*. Nasr has been the foremost traditionalist thinker bringing the wisdom of the ages to bear on the contemporary environmental crisis.

*

Other traditionalists include Lord Northbourne, Leo Schaya, Philip Sherrard, Joseph Epes Brown, Gai Eaton, Rama Coomaraswamy, William Stoddart and Ranjit Fernando (of whom the first four are no longer living). There are, apart from the traditionalists themselves, several scholars and thinkers whose work exhibits, in varying degree, a strong traditionalist influence. Mention should be made of Huston Smith, Elémire Zolla, Toshihiko Izutsu, Kathleen Raine, Brian Keeble, William Chittick, James Cutsinger, Wolfgang Smith, Shojun Bando, Adrian Snodgrass, E.F. Schumacher and Julius Evola (about whom more later).[112] The names of other traditionalists can be found in the pages of journals such as *Studies in Comparative Religion*, *Sophia Perennis*, *Études Traditionnelles*, *Sophia*, *Temenos*[113] and *Sacred Web* (though it must be remembered that many contributors to these journals are in no way traditionalist). Discussing the work of contemporary traditionalists, Gai Eaton observed that

112 For information on some of these figures see Notes on Contributors in Y. Ibish & P.L. Wilson, *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, 469-477.

113 There are two journals published under this name, one in Scandinavia, the other in London. It is to the latter that we here refer. This journal was succeeded by *Temenos Academy Review*.

> These books and articles present variety in unity, very different voices speaking from a single standpoint. Few readers respond to them in a neutral or tepid fashion. For some they open up new horizons, often with a sense of shock, discovery and delight, while others, who cannot bear to have their ingrained habits of thought and all the cherished assumptions of the age so ruthlessly challenged, are angered and outraged. They provoke ... a polarization of perspectives which serves to clarify thought and to define the demarcation line between the basic tendencies of our time, the traditional and the modernist ...[114]
>
> *Traditionalism and the Sophia Perennis*

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114 G. Eaton, *King of the Castle*, 219.