

Book Review

The Transcendent Unity of Religions, by Frithjof Schuon (The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984)

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The publication of this book in the original French in 1948 was an event of great importance. Already in 1935 the author had published his first book, a collection of profound meditations such as might serve to introduce the reader to esoterism in its universal sense of *religio perennis*, and for those who had read that, this new book came as no surprise. But the earlier publication had been relatively inaccessible both because it was in German and on account of its aphoristic style. It is true that Schuon had also written some remarkable articles which had appeared in the journal *Etudes Traditionnelles*. But in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* he suddenly came before the public in a much fuller sense with a major work which, though he has equaled it in others, will probably never be surpassed. T. S. Eliot's remark¹, "I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religions", might well be made today; and evidently others were not slow to form an opinion similar to Eliot's—whence its undelayed publication not only in English but also in Italian, German, Spanish and Portuguese.

By 1948 Guénon's writing was more or less finished. His full message had already been delivered; the same applies to Coomaraswamy, who had died in the previous year; and Guénon himself had only just over two more years to live. The work of both these sages, especially Guénon's, was indispensable in that it served to put facts of vital importance before the West,

¹ He must have made it about 1951, for it was part of his advice to Fabers to publish the first English edition which came out in 1953, and not in 1957 as this new revised edition tells us.

facts which that world had lost sight of, or of which it had only known certain aspects. Europeans and Americans needed to have defined for them once more, in precise and certain terms, the different degrees in the hierarchy of the universe and their counterparts in man; in particular, they needed to be reminded of the largely forgotten meaning of the word Intellect, and of the normal relationship between Intellect and reason. It was also necessary to reestablish a clear grasp of certain concepts that three or four centuries of humanism had blurred. Various questions required an unequivocal answer. What is tradition, and what are myths, symbols and rites? What is the difference between esoterism and exoterism? And within esoterism what is the difference between a path of love and a path of knowledge? There were also practical considerations which had to be emphasized, such as the obligation to adhere to a traditional form—in less Guénonian terms, the need to practice an orthodox religion—and the necessity for initiation into an esoteric order before there can be any question of following a spiritual path.

As a writer, Guénon could be likened to an archer: the teachings he gives are like arrow after arrow, shot from a basis of undeliberating certitude. Most of the arrows hit the centre of the target, and this manner of writing carries with it, in virtue of its spontaneity, an undeniable attraction for the reader. It was my privilege to be the first reader of *Le Règne de la Quantité*, which the author gave me, chapter by chapter, as it came from his pen. When it was finished, he said he would make a fair copy of it, but this showed itself to have been quite unnecessary, for there was no difference between it and the so called “rough copy” which I had read. That book is unquestionably one of Guénon’s masterpieces; but as regards his writing in general, more deliberation would have enabled him to avoid unfortunate mistakes. Some of his “arrows” went wide of the mark, a few even very wide, and two of his books, *East and West* and *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* are beyond repair, for they contain too many errors to be republishable, which is all the more to be regretted in that they also contain a wealth of fine passages. However, it should be possible to salvage these, by including them in an anthology of Guénon’s writings, which would make a precious volume, though it is no doubt less immediately called for than the long awaited Schuon anthology which has just been published.

The writings of Schuon have shown themselves to be necessary in more ways than one. It was imperative, for the sake of the West—and also of the East—that there should be a continuer of the work of Guénon and Coomaraswamy; and in particular there was need for a writer capable of filling in the inevitable gaps, large and small, which had been left by the combined publications of these two great pioneers. Moreover Schuon not only has that capability to an outstanding degree, but he is also, at the same time, something of a providential complement to his predecessors as regards the way he delivers his message. There is often, in Guénon, an implicit “take it or leave it”, whereas Schuon will go as far as is legitimately possible to meet, on their own ground, the holders of an opinion against which he is arguing—a tactic which serves in the end to make his refutation all the more unanswerable. Guénon’s somewhat “sagittarian” approach not seldom involves him in over-simplification. But Schuon never simplifies: his theses

are worked out in detail, with all possible objections foreseen, met half way, given their due, and outweighed. One has the impression that the author is his own severest critic.

As an example of this thoroughness we may take the question of proselytization, which could scarcely fail to arise in the context of the transcendent unity of religions. No one could claim that he fails to do justice to the positive aspect of missionary activities. “Missionaries...follow a way that possesses, at least in principle, a sacrificial aspect; consequently the subjective reality of this way will always retain its mystic meaning, independent of the objective reality of missionary activity.” And apart from such “subjective” justifications, we are reminded that an individual may be better suited to a “foreign” religion than he is to that of the world where he was born and brought up. In such relatively rare cases a missionary may be needed to actualize the conversion from one religion to another. We are also reminded that “it is possible to pass from one religious form to another without being converted, which may happen for reasons of esoteric and therefore spiritual expediency”. No example of any such reason is given, but one which immediately springs to mind is the presence of a great spiritual Master in the religion to which the change is made and the absence of his counterpart in the other religion. Such a case altogether transcends the missionary domain.

Schuon is writing above all for the Western world and he therefore gives prominence, in the context of religious propagation, to the question of the preaching of the Gospel “outside the predestined and normal world of Christianity”. But he considers also, in illuminating detail, the encounter between the oldest and the youngest of living religions; and for the multitude of conversions to Islam which resulted from the Muslim penetration of India he gives a profound explanation which as far as we know, has never been given before.

On the other hand, our acceptance of the truth expressed in the book’s title leads us to hope for arguments springing directly from it, nor does Schuon disappoint us. Again with particular reference to Christian missionaries, he gives what are perhaps the most powerful arguments ever formulated against the claim that any single religion could possibly be the one and only purveyor of truth. By way of example, we may quote the following passage:

To suppose that God, while desiring the well-being of humanity, should have seen fit to leave the vast majority of men—including the most gifted—to stagnate for thousands of years, practically without hope, in the darkness of mortal ignorance, and that in wishing to save the human race He should have seen fit to choose a means so materially and psychologically ineffective as a new religion which, long before it could be brought to the notice of all mankind, had not only acquired an increasingly particularized and local character, but was even, by force of circumstances, partially corrupted in its original environment—to suppose that God could act in such a manner is highly presumptuous and flagrantly contradicts the nature of God, the essence of which is Goodness and Mercy. This nature, as theology is far from being unaware, can be ‘terrible’ but not monstrous.

We may also quote in this context another example of “naked truth” in connection with attempts to convert Hindus to Christianity:

Brahmins are invited to abandon completely a religion that has lasted for several thousands of years, one that has provided the spiritual support of innumerable generations and has produced flowers of wisdom and holiness down to our times. The arguments that are produced to justify this extraordinary demand are in no wise logically conclusive, nor do they bear any proportion to the magnitude of the demand; the reasons that the Brahmins have for remaining faithful to their spiritual patrimony are therefore infinitely stronger than the reasons by which it is sought to persuade them to cease being what they are. The disproportion, from the Hindu point of view, between the immense reality of the Brahmanic tradition and the insufficiency of the Christian counter-arguments is such as to prove quite sufficiently that had God wished to submit the world to one religion only, the arguments put forward on behalf of this religion would not be so feeble, nor those of certain so-called ‘infidels’ so powerful; in other words, if God were on the side of one religious form only, the persuasive power of this form would be such that no man of good faith would be able to resist it.

Equally unanswerable is his refutation of the claim that Islam is a pseudo-religion:

That God should have allowed human blindness to create heresies within traditional civilizations is in conformity with the Divine Laws that govern the whole of creation; but that God could have allowed a religion that was merely the invention of a man to conquer a part of humanity and to maintain itself for more than a thousand years in a quarter of the inhabited world, thus betraying the love, faith, and hope of a multitude of sincere and fervent souls—this again is contrary to the laws of the Divine Mercy, or in other words, to those of Universal Possibility. The Redemption is an eternal act that cannot be situated in either time or space, and the sacrifice of Christ is a particular manifestation or realization of it on the human plane; men were able to benefit from the Redemption as well before the coming of Jesus Christ as after it, and outside the visible Church as well as within it. If Christ had been the only manifestation of the Word, supposing such a uniqueness of manifestation to be possible, the effect of His birth would have been the instantaneous reduction of the universe to ashes.

What has already been said will not lead the reader to expect an ordinary study in comparative religion. It is true that the religions are compared, and in fact the extreme differences between them in both form and perspective are brought out here as perhaps never before. But the necessity for these differences is made clear and each form, instead of being set

before us like an “opaque” screen, is shown to be a partially transparent veil through which we are given a glimpse of the Transcendent Unity that presides over them all alike.

It is typical of Schuon to overcome difficulties rather than avoid them. Many of the “stumbling-blocks” of religion are here transformed, as it were, into stepping-stones across which the reader is brought to a fuller understanding of the truth. A supreme example is his treatment of the passage in the Book of Samuel concerning David, Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba. This outwardly “scandalous” narrative is made here the basis for the masterly exposition of a profound theological truth, which exoterism passes over in silence, and to which only esoterism can do justice. Much light is also thrown on the very negative judgment that the Book of Kings passes upon Solomon: “For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods...and Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord”. Many other questions also, of various kinds, find an unlooked-for but most compelling answer. Why, for example, although esoterism is reserved by its very nature for an intellectual elite, that is, a small body of men—why have esoteric brotherhoods, such as the Pythagorean and Taoist orders and the *turuq* in Islam, always had a relatively large number of members? Why, again, do not only the exoteric representatives of a religion but also members of its intellectual *elite* often seem to deny the truth of other religions? Why, for example, did St. Bernard preach a crusade against Islam? Why, on the other hand, does the Koran deny that the Jews succeeded in crucifying Christ?

After a chapter on the limitations of exoterism, and one on the universality and transcendence of esoterism which contains, among other things, a remarkable passage on the problem of the existence of evil, the author goes on to consider the question of forms in art. He explains that owing to the inversion of this world in relation to what lies above it, “the highest realities are most clearly reflected in their remotest reflections, namely, in the sensible or ‘material’ order”. One may say that because a man’s sensory perceptions rank lower in this world than his mental conceptions, they are a clearer image or symbol of intellectual perception. The act of eating, for example, gives one direct knowledge of what one eats, and spiritual vision, which is an act of intellectual perception in the true sense, also gives one—according to the testimony of the saints—direct knowledge of what is perceived, whereas the human mind can only perceive things indirectly. “Sensible forms therefore correspond with exactness to intellections, and it is for this reason that traditional art has rules which apply the cosmic laws and universal principles to the domain of forms.... When art ceases to be traditional and becomes human, individual, and therefore arbitrary, that is infallibly the sign—and secondly the cause—of an intellectual decline”. This exposition of the relationship between outward forms and spiritual realities is crowned with the following passage: “The ‘Beauty’ of God corresponds to a deeper reality than His ‘Goodness’, no matter how paradoxical this may appear at first sight.... What is principally ‘great’ will be ‘small’ in the manifested order, and that which is ‘inward’ in the Principle will appear as ‘outward’ in manifestation, and vice versa. It is because of this inverse analogy that in man beauty is outward and goodness inward—at least in the usual sense

of these words—contrary to what obtains in the principal order where Goodness is itself an expression of Beauty”.

This chapter inveighs against western European art from the time of the Renaissance—when art ceased to be sacred, that is, symbolic—down to the present day. With regard to the modern East he says: “It has often been noticed that Oriental peoples, including those reputed to be the most artistic, show themselves for the most part entirely lacking in aesthetic discernment with regard to whatever comes to them from the West. All the ugliness born of a world more and more devoid of spirituality spreads over the East with unbelievable facility, not only under the influence of politico-economic factors, which would not be so surprising, but also by the free consent of those who, by all appearances, had created a world of beauty, that is a civilization in which every expression, including the most modest, bore the imprint of the same genius. Since the very beginning of Western infiltration, it has been astonishing to see the most perfect works of art set side by side with the worst trivialities of industrial production”. After explaining this paradox, he draws a parallel between what the Orientals are doing today and what was done, at the time of the so-called Renaissance, by “the nations of the West themselves who, after having created—we will not say ‘invented’—a perfect traditional art, proceeded to disown it in favour of the residues of the individualistic and empty art of the Graeco-Romans, which has finally led to the artistic chaos of the modern world”.

In a chapter on “The Ternary Aspect of Monotheism”, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all considered in their relation to each other and in their relation to the religion of Abraham. This is supplemented by a chapter on “Christianity and Islam” which leads to “The Universality and Particular Nature of the Christian Religion”. Guénon, to whom the author sent the typescript of the book before it was published was particularly struck by this chapter; and while giving the highest praise to the work as a whole, he made special mention of those parts of it which deal with Christianity as containing much that urgently needed to be said. “It is important”, he said, “that this book should appear as soon as possible”.

A remarkable final chapter, “To be Man is to Know”, has been added for the second edition. In it the human intelligence is comprehensively defined, and we are shown that to be spiritually operative it must not only be superhuman, that is, in some degree of contact with the Divine Intellect which is its root, but it must also be totally human, in full awareness of its prolongations in both will and sentiment, for “if there is an intelligence which is conceptual or doctrinal, there is another which is existential or moral: it is necessary to be intelligent not only in our thought but also in our being”.