

THE 11TH HOUR



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BERSERKER

BOOKS



*The
Eleventh
Hour*

The Eleventh Hour

*The Spiritual Crisis of the Modern
World in the Light of
Tradition and Prophecy*

Martin Lings

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PREFACE

ACCORDING to an ancient and still recognized legal principle an accused man cannot plead, in his defence, ignorance of the law; and since in the older civilizations the temporal and the spiritual were organically connected, this principle may well have originated as a prolongation of the dogma that on the Day of Judgement it will not be possible to plead ignorance of the basic truths of religion.

The dogma in question is to be found expressed, implicitly or explicitly, in various ways. Islam, for example, is particularly explicit: in the Koran, God is said to have taken to Himself, out of the loins of Adam, the seeds of all future generations of men and to have put to them the question: 'Am I not your Lord?', to which they answered in the affirmative. The Koran adds that they were made to testify, 'lest ye should say on the Day of the Resurrection: "Verily, of this we were unaware"'.¹

In other words, every human soul is imbued with what might be called the sense of the Absolute or of the Transcendent, the sense of a Supreme Power that is both Origin and End of the created universe which It infinitely transcends. This sense belongs to the faculty of the Intellect, which is man's means of perceiving what lies above and beyond the plane of his world; and though the full power of the Intellect was lost at the Fall, what remains of its light is none the less sufficiently strong to be undeniable, as the above Koranic verse makes clear. This residue of heart-knowledge—for the Intellect is enthroned in the Heart¹—

¹ This word is written here with a capital to indicate that it means, not the bodily heart, but the centre of the soul, that is, the point through which passes

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is man's highest faculty, and may still be termed intellect if only in a relative sense. Its survival does not however prevent the refusal to see it—a refusal which can become second nature. 'Hardness of heart' was originally the name of the chronic blindness in question.

In the 'Dark Ages' students were taught that the faculties are ranged in hierarchy, of which the summit is Intellect, inasmuch as it is concerned with transcendent realities, whereas reason, which ranks as a subordinate second to it, is limited to this world. Since 'the Enlightenment' however the Intellect in its original sense has been withdrawn from the attention of students; but the word itself, brought down from its supernatural level, has been retained in virtue of its high-sounding effect. In particular, its much used adjective has now taken on the sense of 'mentally active'; and since much of the activity is concerned with questioning the existence of the transcendent,² many of the so called 'intellectuals' are at the opposite pole from true intellectuality. The confusion is so widespread that it would seem a great paradox—and yet it would be true—to say that religious faith, of all that is now 'officially' recognized as a human possibility, comes nearest to intellectual awareness, though it must be admitted that the two do not coincide unless we understand faith in its higher sense of certitude.

Robbed of its name, the intellect still subsists, which means that there is still something in man which is

the vertical axis in virtue of which man is Mediator between Heaven and earth.

² One aspect of the transcendent which is most frequently called in question is the miraculous. To deny miracles is thought to be intelligent and even intellectual. In reality such a denial results from an exceedingly unintelligent rationalism. A glimmering of intellectuality would make it clear that miracles are inevitable if there is to be any operative bond or link—and that is what the word religion means—between God and man. 'If we term

incorruptible and inviolable, a supramental organ of knowledge, which unlike the mind is proof against error. It follows from this that sincerity, which today is so often proffered as an excuse for error, or as a mitigating circumstance for it, is in fact incompatible with it, for sincerity worthy of the name presupposes total adherence, and there can be no such totality if one part is dormant. By way of example, to speak of a 'sincere atheist' is to utter a contradiction in terms, for the person in question is quite literally 'not all there'. If he were, or even if there were a particle of intellect vibrant within him, he could never assent to such an absolute denial of that which the heart knows to be true, theism being the very substance of man's heart. Admittedly, the atheist is an extreme case; but in a world where the prevailing ideas are exclusively 'horizontal', without any dimension of height or of depth, the odds against the intellect are considerable, that is, against its becoming effectively operative in any given individual. It is however by no means always totally dormant, and this explains the widespread doubts and perplexities of the modern world when many, perhaps even the majority, are in a state of more or less passively following a trend of thought which deep within themselves they suspect to be wrong—'houses divided against themselves'. To describe this division as the conflict between mental persuasion and heart knowledge would be along the right lines, but in most cases the word

"natural" that which simply obeys the logic of things, the supernatural is also natural, but it is so on a scale far vaster than that of physical causality, that of this lower world. The supernatural is the "divinely natural" which, irrumping into an eminently contingent and limited plane of the natural, contradicts the laws of this plane . . . in virtue of a far less contingent and limited causality. If "God exists"—really and fully and not as some unconscious and passive power as the naturalists and deists would have it—then miracles cannot not be.' (Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 112)

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'knowledge' would be too strong, for there is no more than a glimmering on the side of truth.

The following chapters are an attempt to fan the flame of that glimmering and thus to restore the lost balance, first of all by seeking to persuade minds that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from a re-establishment of the normal hierarchic relationships. The reason must become once more conscious of its need for the guidance of a higher authority—an authority which is not, however, subjectively other than it, inasmuch as both intellect and reason are different reaches of the same intelligence, the same ray of light proceeding from the Divine Truth. But the theoretic or virtual restoration of the hierarchy is no more than a beginning, albeit a necessary one. As to its actualization, that is only possible on certain conditions, which cannot be set aside; and this book's main purpose is to point the way to their fulfilment.

1

Signs of the Times

FOR THE LAST two thousand years there has been no century that did not expect shortly 'the end of the world', whatever these words are thought to mean. Already in 40 BC Virgil wrote that the end of the Iron Age was near and that a new Golden Age was soon to begin; and Hinduism has long been awaiting the rider on the white horse, Kalki, the tenth Avatara of Vishnu, who is to close the present 'Dark Age' and inaugurate a new era of perfection. Maitreya, no less eagerly awaited by Buddhists, is clearly none other than the Kalki Avatara, and the same may be said of the Messiah.¹ It is true that in the monotheistic religions, all three of which expect the Messiah, the end of the present cycle is mainly identified with the end of time itself, that is, with Doomsday. But the concept of the Millennium none the less makes it possible to think of the end in a less absolute sense, which is in conformity with the more ancient expectation of a new cycle to follow the close of this, for the Millennium may be considered as the equivalent of the new 'reign of Saturn' which Virgil hymned. As to the signs which precede it, all traditions agree that they are exceedingly negative, though not, as we shall see, to the exclusion of signs which attain to the opposite extreme.

¹ This would seem to be confirmed by Revelation XIX, 5: 'And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse . . .'

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An event so tremendous as the birth of Christ was bound to radiate presentiments beyond the frontiers of the Semitic world. It is therefore not unreasonable to qualify as 'Messianic' the poem² in which Virgil makes his prediction. What seems to have been expected by no one is the two-fold aspect of the advent in question. It was not foreseen that the final triumphant coming would be heralded by a first coming which would not mark the end but only announce it. For the Jews this meant that the Messiah had not yet come in any sense, but they continued to expect him soon; and the final advent was believed by early Christians to be very near indeed, with good reason as they thought, for it seemed to them that Jesus had spoken of it as being not far off. Some six hundred years later, the Koran affirmed that 'the Hour', the promised end, was 'near', and that 'the heavens and the earth are pregnant with it'; and even in the early days of the caliphate it was sometimes said to a caliph: 'Mayst thou live long enough, sire, to give thy kingdom into the hands of Jesus, the son of Mary'. Nor would any early Muslim have believed that today, after 1400 years of Islam, the end would still not yet have come, although the Koran affirms that 'verily a day in the sight of thy Lord is as a thousand years of what ye count'. Despite this reservation, and despite the Biblical equivalent for Jews and Christians, 'a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday', the expectations continued, century after century. They did not however remain at the same degree of intensity. In the Middle Ages, the acuteness of consciences engendered a collective sense of guilt which made it seem that the predicted signs of the second coming had already been fulfilled and that humanity had indeed reached its

² Eclogue iv.

lowest ebb. According to Jewish, Christian and Islamic belief, the immediate threshold of the reign of the Messiah will be the tyranny of the Antichrist; and more than one prominent mediaeval figure was wrongly identified, in widespread opinion, with that greatest of malefactors. But it would no doubt be true to say, at any rate as regards the West, that the last three centuries before this were increasingly less expectant of the end. The gradual weakening of faith and the consequent lessening of attention paid to the Scriptures were aggravated by self-satisfaction at the so-called 'Renaissance' and, in the eighteenth century, at the so-called 'Enlightenment'. It is also in the nature of things that expectation, prolonged beyond a certain point, should begin to flag.

What then of the present century? Today belief in God and the Scriptures tends to be weaker than ever; and for Westerners it has largely been replaced by agnosticism, not to speak of the atheism which, in vast tracts of earthly territory, is now systematically indoctrinated into children from an early age. Nor is the widespread belief in evolution and progress conducive to thinking along the same lines as our ancestors thought. We might therefore presume the Western world to be correspondingly less expectant of the end today than ever it was before. But is it? The answer is clearly no. There is, however, a marked difference between the present and the past in this respect. In the past it was concluded that the end must be near, but its imminence was not felt. Today the grounds for conviction have largely been set aside or forgotten; but the end is 'in the air', existentially sensed. It is as if the souls and bodies of men were woven of finality. This is undoubtedly one of the great signs of the times; and it coincides with other signs which are less dependent upon intuition and which, in a wide variety of ways, address themselves to reason, celestial

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signs relating to prophecies,³ visions and auditions, and signs which may be called human, in an individual or a political sense. These terrestrial signs—or some of them—are, respectively, the themes of two subsequent chapters; but it must first be made clear why it is important to be aware of these signs and to recognize them for what they are.

³ Such as the famous twelfth-century prophecy of St Malachy about the Popes, according to which the end is to come in the reign of the next Pope but one. For a study of prophecy, see 'St Malachy's Prophecy of the Popes' in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer–Autumn 1985, pp 148–153. This sign may be said to appeal to the reason in that most of its predictions, that is, all those which are related to things now past, have already proved themselves to be true.

2

The Vineyard and the Marketplace

THE SENSE of the transcendent, which is an essential aspect of human intelligence, implies, by inevitable extension, the consciousness of a need to transcend the limitations of this earthly state. The aim and end of religion in an exoteric sense is salvation which means, ultimately, Paradise and therefore transcendence. But the exoterist is one in whom the higher reaches¹ of the intelligence are dormant. He needs to be told to do this and not to do that on the basis of trust in Providence to fulfil, on condition of those pious acts and abstentions, the promise of salvation. His sense of the transcendent is limited to belief in a Supreme Power on the one hand, and on the other hand the innate desire 'to live happily ever afterwards'.² But unlike the esoterist he does not have already in this life the presentiment of higher states.

¹ Or inner reaches, for there is a spiritual coincidence between height and inwardness or depth.

² Children are in some respects wiser than their parents, and many children are unwilling to accept a story which does not lead up to the most positive of conclusions. Nor should the significance of this childly scruple be underestimated, for the desire implicit in it is not just a naive piece of wishful thinking, as those who have stifled it in themselves like to think. Desire is summed up, in the depth of every human soul, by the longing for perfect happiness that will not end. To maintain otherwise is hypocrisy; and the fact

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'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.' This truth is the basis of esoterism, the science and discipline of inwardness; and the aspiration of the esoterist goes beyond salvation to sanctification, which in its highest sense is deification, that is, union (the Hindu *yoga*) with the Absolute Infinite Perfection of the Divine Essence. This extinction of all relativity is the *nirvāna* of Buddhism; and in Islamic mysticism the saying 'the Sufi is not created' testifies to the same Ultimate Reality.

Christ's affirmation of the truth of the inwardness of Heaven must be taken together with his promise: 'Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you'. But despite the perpetual validity of the guarantee here given, the arduousness of the search is bound to vary from age to age; and since in ours it appears on the surface to be, in some respects, particularly formidable, a reminder that tradition has promised hidden compensations will not be out of place.

I have already considered this elsewhere³ with special reference to 'the labourers in the vineyard'. According to the parable,⁴ those who began work only at the eleventh hour received the same wage as those who had 'borne the burden and the heat of the day'. The latecomers were moreover the first to be paid. To develop now the question in more detail than before, it must be remembered that the parable is led up to by a sharp distinction between exoterism and esoterism, namely the incident of the rich young man whose attachment to his wealth disqualified him for the

of this universal desire is a 'proof'—not by logic in the ordinary sense but by what might be called intellectual logic—that man was made for Paradise and that his true homeland is not here. The same fact is therefore, by extension, a 'proof' of the truth of religion.

³ *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, pp. 74–6.

⁴ St Matthew xx, 1–16.

inner life. Esoterism is set before us in its aspect of total commitment which, it is promised, will always receive its due reward. 'But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.'⁵ Then follows the parable, to illustrate this reservation. It does not however explain it; the paradox is reiterated, but something of an enigma remains, though a partial key to it lies in the way in which esoterism is here represented. If we suppose, to throw light on the question, that there are two spiritual men more or less equally gifted, and that one of them is condemned to die the next day, whereas no such sentence hangs over the other, it is not difficult to see that the condemned man is in ideal circumstances for realizing, immediately and profoundly, a total commitment to the things of the Afterlife, and that he thereby has a certain priority over the other man. Not that we now living are in ourselves any more condemned than our ancestors were; but in their day the macrocosm itself was not under sentence of imminent 'death', as now it is; and this imminence engenders a climate which is potentially favourable to otherworldliness, and which can be made to serve spiritual ends as it were by refraction from macrocosm to microcosm. The climate of the eleventh hour can also be favourable to spiritual fruition and fulfilment in the same incalculable and mysterious way.

A third reason why the last should be first is related to what might be called spiritual impetus. The parable's esoteric context makes all the more obvious the symbolism of the vineyard and also, by contrast, that of the marketplace from which the labourers were hired. The fact that they were 'standing idle in the marketplace' may be taken as a sign of their virtual spirituality. To be busy in the marketplace and thus fully identified with it is to be, like the rich

⁵ Ibid. xix, 30.

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young man, passive towards the pull of the outer world. The parable thus serves to reiterate also, by implication, what is—and has been throughout historic⁶ times—the great choice with which mankind is faced, the choice between 'vineyard' and 'marketplace', that is, between being active with regard to the Kingdom of Heaven and remaining passive in outward profanity. But if the vineyard is a prolongation of the Kingdom,⁷ the marketplace was always, in every civilization except the modern one, a prolongation of the vineyard. The passage from the one to the other was relatively easy, the way was clearly sign-posted, the immense superiority of the vineyard was officially recognized in the marketplace which was even, to a certain extent, a preparation for it. But today there is no connection whatsoever between the two, and the dominant ideas of the one are at the opposite pole from those of the other. The passage from marketplace to vineyard now requires, in addition to the qualifications which have always been necessary, a penetration and a resolution capable of making a break with one's past more totally than ever before; and the liberating efforts of intelligence and will that are thus called into action may be prolonged, after the vineyard has been reached, to add their momentum, combined with that of the eleventh hour itself,⁸ to the 'work', that is, to the spiritual path.

⁶ This reservation is necessary because there must have been a time when the 'marketplace', even in its most positive sense, namely exoterism, did not yet exist.

⁷ The parable begins: 'The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers unto his vineyard.'

⁸ It is a mistake to suppose that the flow of time is uniform: in earlier ages the temporal condition lies more lightly on the world, as it does on the young in the analogous lesser cycle of human life; but as the cycle advances time tightens its grip which means that it makes itself felt at an ever increasing impetus, whence the 'velocity' to which mankind is now subjected, and

There is yet another reason, no doubt the most powerful of all, why the last should be first, and we will come back to it later. Meantime it is relevant to mention a sign yet to be realized in which there lies, for mankind, a grave responsibility. This herald of the end, which is none the less distinct from the end, is the devastation of which it was said: 'And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.'⁹ To speak of an elect is to speak of the 'vineyard'; and it is assuredly not this precinct but 'the marketplace'—the modern civilization—which is to be destroyed. Elsewhere¹⁰ the days are referred to as 'the days of vengeance',¹¹ and since Providence is by definition long-suffering, the imminence of an overflow of Divine Anger proves that a limit has been reached, and that a sector of the human race has gone to certain negative extremes. It is these above all which make it now imperative for a would-be worker in the 'vineyard' to turn his back on the 'marketplace' more implacably than ever before. But in

which can become a spiritual advantage wherever life has been made to flow in a spiritual channel.

⁹ St Matthew, xxiv, 22.

¹⁰ St Luke, xxi, 22.

¹¹ The auditions referred to in what follows are clearly relevant, and they deserve our attention in virtue of the person who experienced them. In 1957 Pope Pius XII authorized the process of beatification of Francisco and Jacinta, two shepherd children to whom the Blessed Virgin had appeared several times at Fatima in Portugal in 1917. This papal decision meant that a prominent member of the commission concerned with the process had to make an official visit to Sister Lucia, the third visionary of Fatima—now a nun in the Carmelite Convent at Coimbra—to interrogate her about the last days of her two fellow seers; and amongst what was published later, apart from what concerned the immediate purpose of the interview, there were certain general remarks made by Sister Lucia of which we may quote the following: 'Three times Our Lady has told me that we are approaching the latter days . . . The Lord will punish the world very soon . . . Many nations will vanish from the face of the earth.'

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order to do so it is necessary to see the modern world's enormities as such, and to be actively and vigilantly opposed to them, instead of being, if only subconsciously, their passive accomplice. With this in view, the next two chapters are, in their different ways, a demonstration of some of the extremes in question.

3

'And from him that hath not . . .'

THERE ARE beyond doubt many in the world of today, perhaps even a majority, who would be inclined to put the question: 'What is it about our times rather than any other which has brought "the cup of God's anger"¹ to the brink of overflow?' Not that anyone considers these times to be perfect, or even good; but modern education tends to inculcate the conviction that previous centuries were considerably less good, and that the further back we go, the worse the world becomes. Yet none of the people of those 'dark ages' would have presumed to ask the above question. On the contrary they felt, mistakenly in fact, that they had indeed reached an extreme of guilt such as might well bring down on them the Divine vengeance. That the question 'Why on us?' should be asked today by a majority is not only a sign of the times but one could also say that the very putting of the question is itself the answer to the question. In other words, modern man's lack of sense of his own shortcoming is crucial; and this lack is not to be

¹ In the last of her apparitions to the four peasant girls at Garabandal in Spain between the years 1961 and 1965, the Blessed Virgin said: 'previously the cup was filling; now it is almost overflowing'. From the context it is clear that the reference is to the cup of Divine Anger. (See F. Sanchez-Ventura y Pascual, *The Apparitions of Garabandal*, pp. 171-3.)

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separated from its cause, namely, the failure to understand the true nature of man. If that nature were understood, the ideal it represents would serve as a criterion in the light of which the past would appear much less bad and the present much less good.

There is no traditional divergence, from one end of the world to the other, as to what constitutes primordial man, and the same applies to fallen man. The imagery used to tell of the Fall may differ from religion to religion, but the loss incurred is always the same, that is, loss of centrality and therefore of contact with the vertical axis which connects this state with all the higher states. 'Original sin' is nothing other than the incapacity, by reason of that loss, to be what the Taoists call 'True Man', that is to fulfil adequately man's primordial function of Pontifex, of 'bridge-maker' or mediator between this world and all that lies above it. But the privation incurred at the Fall was not absolute, nor has man been replaced as mediator by any other creature. There is therefore still only one criterion for judging the worth of any human individual, and that is his nearness—or farness—with regard to the centre, and the intensity—or laxity—of his aspiration to transcend his fallen state.

In answer to this chapter's initial question, it would be possible—though it would not be the best answer—to draw up an almost endless list of twentieth century facts which reverberate with evidence that man has reached a limit of distance from his primordial nature. Yet to list factual examples would be merely to lay hands on the fringe of the question. Incomparably more significant is the general attitude and outlook of which the examples are the excrescences.

It may be argued that generations other than the more recent ones have fallen far short of the human norm, and this no one could rightly deny. But modern man is unique

in having fallen so far as to lose sight of it, to the point of questioning its existence, and even of fabricating a new 'norm' out of the limitations of his own decadent experience. Our less recent ancestors knew that they had 'come down from above'; twentieth-century man is alone in thinking and in priding himself that he has 'come up from below'.

The basic purpose of religion is to open up, for man, the way of return to his lost centrality. So long as he possessed spontaneously his bond with the Transcendent, the 'ligament' to which the term *religio* refers, it was not necessary for Heaven to reveal a religion in the ordinary sense. The first revealed religion was the response of Providence to the Fall of man, and this Divine redress established on earth a Golden Age, named in Sanskrit *Krita-Yuga* because in it the rites necessary for regaining what was lost were 'accomplished'. Thus, by religion, the world of man became once more, albeit at a lower level than that of the Terrestrial Paradise, an image of Perfection. Every image of the Absolute is, however, bound ultimately to confess that it is merely an image,² and that first age could not retain the

² This applies to all that is relative, even the Heavens. But these worlds of the Spirit, although created, are the domain of inviolability, for they are as it were plunged in the Light of the 'Divine Halo'. The Paradise of the Essence, from which this Light emanates, is the Absolute Itself; and into Its Infinite Perfection the created universe is ultimately reabsorbed. It is by this reabsorption—the Apocatastasis—that the Celestial Paradises avow their relativity, and they do so within the framework of the safety, immortality and incorruptibility that Salvation guarantees. The Paradises, at the approach of the Apocatastasis, will of metaphysical necessity reveal their limitative aspect, as if they had become less vast or as if God were less close than before . . . Without involving suffering of any kind, which would be contrary to the very definition of Heaven, the aspect "other than God" will manifest itself to the detriment of the aspect "near to God". This will be no more than a passing shadow, for then will come the Apocatastasis whose glory will surpass all promises and all expectations in conformity with the principle that God never fulfils less than He promises, but on the contrary always more.' (Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, p. 137.)

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level of its outset. The continuance of religion, when endangered, was ensured by further Divine Revelations,³ subsequent to that which inaugurated the Golden Age. It was thus made always possible for the downward impetus to be checked for many individuals and for some, an ever decreasing number, to be overcome altogether. But the impetus is bound to continue as a general tendency down to the end of the cycle when the world as a whole reaches its maximum 'separation' from its Divine Origin.

The outlook that governs the modern civilization and that characterizes anyone who would be generally recognized as 'a typical product of the twentieth century' may be considered as a negative extreme in that it represents no less than man's capitulation to the exact opposite of truth as regards what concerns him most, that is, the nature and function of the human being—a capitulation that is all the more total for being unconscious. That is indeed the crux of the matter, for instead of being bent on regaining what was lost, the loser has come to believe that he has suffered no loss whatsoever, and that mankind, having evolved from next to nothing, is now better than it has ever been. There are even some so-called religious authorities who would like to abolish the dogma of original sin on the grounds that it is an insult to the dignity of the fully developed and enlightened *homo sapiens* of today.

So total a defection would have seemed impossible, even in a relatively near past. But the parable of the talents explains how the apparently impossible can be realized in a downward as well as in an upward direction. For just as

³ The spiritual path, that is, the path of return to the centre, is also in a sense a chain of losses and restorations of equilibrium. But there it is always a question of sacrificing a lower equilibrium in order to gain a higher one, whereas in the unfolding of the cycle of manifestation it is the inverse that takes place.

the spiritual path, that is, the path of excelling oneself, is only practicable because 'unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance', so also, because 'from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath',⁴ the unspiritual man is liable to find himself suddenly lacking in those very endowments that seemed most securely his. Thus, for example, the rationalist and the modern scientist, having closed themselves to the Spirit by demanding rational and scientific explanations of transcendent truths, are liable to find themselves deserted by logic and by science in the hour of greatest need. Still bristling with anti-religious arguments, they have meekly let themselves become the dupes of one of the most subrational persuasions and one of the most unscientific theories that have ever trespassed upon the mind of man.

Though in many respects they overlap, rationalism and scientism may be considered as the two poles, subjective and objective, of the pseudo-religion of the modern world. Rationalism, with its false logic, wishful thinking, and warped sense of values supplies the pseudo-faith, namely, the belief that man has progressed throughout the ages and that he will inevitably continue to progress in the future. The error here is almost entirely subjective: progressivism is rooted in complacency, and it depends not so much on false data as on a false interpretation of certain facts coupled with a perpetual readiness to turn a blind eye to other facts. In scientism, which supplies the pseudo-doctrine of evolution, the error is mainly objective, at any rate as far as the 'layman' is concerned. Here the scientist, who is the 'high priest' of the modern world and who alone has power to speak *ex cathedra*, misleads his flock with a false object of faith. This is by far the greatest stumbling block, for

⁴ St Matthew, xxv, 29.

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the question of progress must always remain a matter of opinion, but evolution is presented as a scientific fact that 'transcends' all discussion; and whereas truly transcendent doctrines lend wings to the intelligence, the pseudo-transcendent paralyses it and sets up a stifling 'dictatorship' in the soul.

As to the 'layman', it must be admitted that he is subject to considerable pressure. He is pounded by a battery of scientific terms he does not understand, and on the face of it there would seem to be no reason why the scientist—dry, matter-of-fact, purely objective, and infallibly accurate, as he is supposed to be—should wish to deceive as regards evolution. The public is not to know that the scientist is evolutionist, not in virtue of his science, but by 'religion'; yet though this secret is not always well kept⁵ the victims of the deception are for the most part only too eager to be deceived. Progressism is, for evolutionism, the most fertile of soils.

In this context the theories of evolution and progress may be likened to the two cards that are placed leaning one against the other at the 'foundation' of a card house. If they did not support each other, both would fall flat, and the whole edifice, that is, the outlook that dominates the modern world, would collapse. The idea of evolution would have been accepted neither by scientists nor by 'laymen' if the nineteenth-century European had not been convinced of progress, while in this century evolution has served as a guarantee of progress in the face of all appearances to the contrary. To those who refuse to see these

⁵ Some evolutionists make it very clear in their writings and broadcast talks that their case is an outstanding illustration of the truth that man is nothing if not religious, and that if he gives up his religion he inevitably transfers his religious sentiments to something else, endowing it with all those rights and privileges that are the due of religion alone.

appearances and who continue to believe in progress 'because of all that man has achieved in the last hundred years' and 'because there is such promise for the future', there is clearly nothing to be said. But for those whose progressivism is propped up only by evolutionism and leans with all its weight on the teaching that evolution is 'a scientifically proved fact', it can be a relief comparable to waking up after a bad dream to read an objective assessment of evolutionism by a scientist who is not an evolutionist. One such assessment is Douglas Dewar's book *The Transformist Illusion*.⁶ Another is Evan Shute's *Flaws in the Theory of Evolution*.⁷

Shute's title is an understatement, for his book is a demonstration that the theory in question is pure conjecture: the only evolution that has been scientifically attested is on a very small scale and within narrow limits. To conclude from this 'micro-evolution', which no one contests, that there could be such a thing as 'mega-evolution'—for example, that the class of birds could have evolved from the class of reptiles—is not merely conjecture but perverse conjecture, for as Shute points out, micro-evolution demonstrates the presence in nature of all sorts of unseen barriers that ensure the stability of the various classes and orders of animals and plants and that invariably cause transformation, when it has run its little course, to come to a dead end.

The realm of conjecture is always the realm of disagreement. Moreover some evolutionists are more scientific and more objective than others, and when their sense of science has been outraged beyond measure, they have not always been able to resist pouring scorn on some of the more fantastic ideas of their fellow evolutionists. As a rule such

⁶ Dehoff Publications, Murfreesboro, Tenn, 1957.

⁷ Craig Press, Nutley, NJ, 1961.

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sallies are isolated and have little effect, if indeed they do not pass unnoticed, but when gathered together, as they are in *Flaws in the Theory of Evolution*, their weight is considerable; and by quoting from the evolutionists themselves,⁸ Shute has been able to show that the theory of mega-evolution is no more than a shell inside which its champions have demolished each other's conjectures until there is nothing left.

To sum up his thesis, the more science delves into the amazing intricacies of nature, the more overwhelming is the evidence that piles up against evolutionism. As he himself puts it: 'Mega-evolution is really a philosophy dating from the days of biological ignorance; it was a philosophic synthesis built up in a biological kindergarten.'

Dewar, in his book, gives amongst other things many outrageous examples of the way in which evolutionist texts continually rely on the ignorance or inobservance of the 'layman'. From these examples we will quote a remark of Darwin's which is of basic significance: 'With some savages the foot has not altogether lost its prehensile power, as is shown by their manner of climbing trees, and of using them in other ways.' The truth is, as Darwin must have known, that any human being can develop with practice, if driven by circumstances, certain powers of grasping with the feet. But such development can be only within very narrow limits, for organically the human foot, unlike the human hand, is not made for grasping. It is made to serve as a basis for man's upright posture and gait, whereas the 'foot' of an ape is organically as prehensile as a hand. In the

⁸ By way of example, he quotes from the American palaeontologist Professor E. A. Hooton: 'You can, with equal facility, model on a Neanderthaloid skull the features of a chimpanzee or the lineaments of a philosopher. These alleged restorations of ancient types of man have very little, if any, scientific value, and are likely only to mislead the public.'

human foot the transverse ligament binds together all five toes, whereas in the ape it leaves the big toe free like a thumb. Let every reader now look at his own hand, which in the above respect is similar to the foot of an ape, and ask himself whether it is imaginable that even in millions of millions of years the ligament that binds together the four fingers could ever come to throw out a kind of noose, lasso the thumb, and bind it up together with the fingers, all this, presumably, taking place under the skin. When Darwin says, 'the foot has not altogether lost its prehensile power', does he mean 'the lassoing has already taken place but the roping in has not quite been effected'? But he relies on such questions not being asked.

Looking at evolutionism from quite a different angle – one that is closer to that of our main theme – it must be remembered that only by escaping from time can man escape from the phases of time. The spiritual path escapes from these phases because only its starting point lies within time. From there onward it is a 'vertical' upward movement through supratemporal domains as represented in Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. But modern science does not know of any such movement, nor is it prepared to admit the possibility of an escape from the temporal condition. The gradual ascent of no return that the evolutionist has in mind is an idea that has been surreptitiously borrowed from religion and naïvely transferred from the supratemporal to the temporal. In entertaining such an idea he is turning his back on his own scientific principles. Every process of development known to modern science is subject to a waxing and waning analogous to the phases of man's life. Even civilizations, as history can testify, have their dawn, their noon, their late afternoon, and their twilight. If the evolutionist outlook were genuinely 'scientist', in the modern sense, it would be assumed that the

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evolution of the human race was a phase of waxing that would necessarily be followed by the complementary waning phase of devolution; and the question of whether or not man was already on the downward phase would be a major feature of all evolutionist literature. The fact that the question is never put, and that if evolutionists could be made to face up to it most of them would drop their theory as one drops a hot coal, does not say much for their objectivity.

There could be no question of any such evolution from the standpoint of ancient science, which did not claim to have everything within its scope, that is, within the temporal domain. It could therefore admit to being transcended by the origins of earthly things. For these origins it looked beyond temporal duration to the Divine creative act that places man (and the whole earthly state) on a summit from which there can only be a decline. The same applies to the different religions, which also have their origins outside time, not in the sense that their respective starting points cannot be more or less dated, but in virtue of each religion's essential aspect, the supratemporal 'ligament' which binds it to the Eternal and without which it could have no efficacy, and also in virtue of the spirituality of its founder who is likewise rooted in Eternity. But this does not apply to the theocratic civilization which is non-existent at the outset of a religion, from which it has to grow in time and therefore, as we have just seen, to wax and then wane.⁹

It is in the final phase of a cycle that a world reaches its extremity of separation from the Principle. Such a period is one of 'remoteness' from God, and one of its necessary characteristics is a humanity largely made up of men and

⁹ We will come back later to this somewhat complex question to which I have already devoted a chapter, 'The Rhythms of Time', in *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*.

women who have no conception of man's true nature and responsibility. He is, for them, not the representative of God on earth, but merely the summit of the animal kingdom. With their backs turned to the centre that is man's rightful place as mediator between Heaven and earth, their 'orientation' is entirely outward, in the direction of the boundary that separates humanity from the lower orders. The centrifugal tendency of modern man is often written on his face so clearly that if an evolutionist were at the same time something of a physiognomist¹⁰ he would indeed see reason to suppose that mankind, having reached its highest point of evolution, was already well advanced in the complementary phase of devolution.

Although such a supposition would bring him, as we shall see, far nearer the truth than he is now, he would none the less be wrong to suppose that the dividing line that separates humanity from the lower orders, as far as life on earth is concerned, could be crossed by anything but a miraculous suspension of the laws of nature. Sacred texts tell us of men having been transformed into apes by an overflow of Divine Anger, but mankind could never, by

¹⁰ An unlikely combination, for physiognomy presupposes the knowledge of what man is and, above all, what God is. The Prophet of Islam said: 'When anyone of you strikes a blow (in battle) let him avoid striking the face (of his enemy), for God created Adam in His image'. This somewhat elliptical utterance demands, by way of commentary, the addition: '... and it is in the face that the image is especially concentrated'. The human face is a mirror that reflects the Divine Qualities. The human hand is also such a mirror, but to be read, it requires knowledge of a special science, whereas the face is an open book to be read by effortless intuition; and physiognomy is nothing other than the ability to see, in any given face, how full and direct (or, as the case may be, how fragmentary and oblique) the reflection is. Traditionally, physiognomical powers are associated with faith (the Prophet said: 'Beware of the believer's power to read the face'), and in fact the man best qualified to judge the quality of a mirror, that is, to judge how faithfully it mirrors an object, is the man who has the clearest vision of that object in itself, apart from the mirror.

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any natural course, devolve into a pe kind any more than the reverse process could take place. Such transformations would require organic changes that, miracles apart, could be effected only by drastic surgical operations. But a man can, after death, 'become an ape' in the sense that he can pass on into another state of existence in which, having lost his centrality, he might occupy a position analogous to that of an ape in this world; and an ape could 'become a man' in the sense that through some mysterious working of Divine Grace¹¹ he might, after his death in this world, be born at the centre of the world that comes 'next' to it on the rim of the *samsara*, the great wheel of universal existence.

It is the function of religion, or one of its functions, to convey to man as much knowledge as he can assimilate with profit; religions differ in exactly what they convey and what they withhold because of the difference of human collectivities. The scope of this book clearly will not allow us to dwell on the question at any length, but it may be remarked in passing that the doctrine of the *samsara*, which was not unknown to pre-Christian Europe but which is no more than implicit in Semitic monotheism, has become once more accessible to the Western world from Hinduism and Buddhism—accessible, that is, to anyone who feels impelled to make a serious study of religion.

According to this doctrine, our present state of earthly existence is merely one of a seemingly endless series of analogous states, all at the same untranscendent level, which we might call subspiritual or subcelestial. Each of

¹¹ Generally speaking, the most desirable destiny in this life for a peripheral being is to be intimately associated with a man who fulfils his centrality enough to be, in some degree, Pontifex. It is also as Pontifex that a man ritually sacrifices an animal. As to ascents made at lower levels in the hierarchy, from one peripheral degree to another, it cannot be inauspicious for a lower being to be overwhelmed and absorbed by a higher one. The law of the jungle would seem to be woven upon the hidden mercies of such evolutions.

these successive worlds has, at its centre, a 'narrow gate' which opens onto the Transcendent and which is a way of escape from the chain of samsaric rebirths and redeaths. But the ascendant aspiration needed for this deliverance is given to none but the central species of each state, that is, man and his counterparts in the other worlds. Peripheral creatures are not free to take any initiative for their own advancement. Although, as we have seen, it is not impossible for them to be reborn into a central state, they cannot actively¹² co-operate with the workings of Divine Grace on their behalf. But a central being can and must cooperate: failure to do so, that is, failure to follow the guidance offered by religion, means deviation from centrality, by outwardness or, at the worst, by downwardness. This greater offence would mean, at death, a descent into one of the samsaric hells, whereas the lesser offence of outwardness would entail, as its natural consequence, the loss of inwardness or centrality, that is, rebirth into the next world as something analogous to one of the peripheral creatures of this world.

The reasons are obvious why the later religions have concentrated on our world to the exclusion of its innumerable counterparts. To escape from one world is to escape from them all; and 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof', which might be interpreted 'sufficient unto one world is the evil thereof', its evil being, all told, the difficulty of escape from it. But truth has its rights, and nothing less than the full doctrine of the *samsara* is capable of giving a concept of the universe adequate to what the

¹² But passively, they are able to submit to the powerful attraction that spirituality can have for them—witness the remarkable relationships which have existed between Saints and animals and of which examples are to be found in the hagiographies of all the religions.

contemplative intelligence demands¹³ as a symbolic basis for meditating on the Divine Infinitude. Moreover the universe, for all its multiplicity, is one whole, so that any simplification of cosmology is liable to leave certain loose threads hanging, to the detriment of any religion that cannot tie them into place.

In the past the majority of people found it natural that not everything should be explained to them. They were satisfied with the promises of religion that what was left unaccounted for in this life would be fully clarified in the Hereafter. But today the danger of 'loose threads' is considerable owing to the existence of so many overactive minds 'set free', as they would put it, 'from the shackles of religion', and enthusiastically bent on sharing their emancipation with others. These 'liberators' are not slow to seize upon certain aspects of our times which the monotheistic perspective has not accounted for and which seem to be incompatible with reliance upon Divine Justice and therefore with belief in God.

If beings have had no existence previous to this life, how can we explain the birth of thousands of souls day after day into conditions spiritually so unfavourable as to offer no apparent hope of salvation? But if one is aware that our position in this state was 'earned' in our previous state upon the great round of existences, the problem no longer

¹³ This doctrine has therefore, in the nature of things, found its way into monotheistic esoterism. Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī, the great Persian Sufi of the thirteenth century, speaks of pre-human peripheral states and of rebirth from mineral to vegetable, from vegetable to animal and from animal to man (*Mathnawi*, III, 3901 *et seq.*, and IV, 3637 *et seq.*, in Nicholson's translation pp. 218 and 472.) Some have interpreted these lines as evolutionism—falsely because there is no gradual development but a series of sudden transformations, and above all because the mineral, vegetable, animal and human states are envisaged as already existing and fully developed. The evolution in question is that of a single being, from the lowest to the highest of these states, from the periphery to the centre.

looms so large. The state of those countless people in the modern world who do not seem to have been given 'a fair chance' can only be the result of their having already developed a centrifugal impetus in one of the *samsara*'s other worlds. The people in question are born into this world at the outside edge of humanity because they had already, in their pre-terrestrial state, deliberately turned a blind eye to the obligations with which centrality is fraught.

If the cosmologies and eschatologies of the more ancient religions have become to a certain extent necessary, they are none the less too vast for the non-contemplative majority of the end of the Iron Age. For most of those who hear it, the doctrine of the *samsara* is doomed in advance to lead to the illusion of reincarnationism,¹⁴ that is, belief in a series of rebirths into this world, for it is difficult to speak of the other worlds except in terms of the one world we know. But dangers of this illusion can be obviated by a true sense of values. The statement that a man could be born in his next life as a lower animal or even as a vegetable or a mineral conveys adequately a truth, provided that the imagination of the hearer is keen enough to galvanize him into the determination to make the most of the inestimable privilege of a central state, 'so hard to obtain'.¹⁵ The danger of the doctrine, apart from the distractions it may lead to, is always that an unimaginative wishful thinker will abstract from it the notion that he will be given 'another chance' and

¹⁴ Reincarnation is often wrongly thought to have been proved by metempsychosis, the transference of certain characteristics from one individual, at his death, to another. Probably the best known examples of metempsychosis are those which have made it possible, after the death of a Dalai Lama, to identify his heir. But there is no question here of the older man's reincarnation in the younger man, nor is it possible for a being to pass twice through the same *samsaric* world. See, in this connection, 'Reincarnation' by Whitall N. Perry in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer-Autumn, 1980.

¹⁵ See Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, chapter IV.

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turn a blind eye to all the rest. But this danger is as nothing compared with the danger of believing that there is no life of any kind after death, a danger that hangs like a shadow over every child who is born into all but the most traditional parts of the modern world.

In any case, the error of reincarnation cannot be put on a level with the error of evolutionism. The word 'reincarnation' as currently used expresses metaphorically, if not literally, what does actually take place. But evolutionism together with its inseparable complement of progressivism, is nothing but a parody of the spiritual path of escape from the *samsara*, a parody that flattens the vertical to the horizontal and for having 'played one's part' offers as a prize, to be awarded posthumously or more precisely 'humously'—that is, not to a blessed spirit but to a corpse—an ever-receding earthly 'welfare' of doubtful possibility and doubtful desirability.

In Communist countries, where the modern pseudo-religion is in fact and by law the state religion, Providence is officially excluded, which is logical and consequent enough, for what function can Divinity have in an entirely flat 'horizontal' universe? In so-called Christendom the pseudo-religion prevails in fact but not by law. In consequence, faith is tolerated, and some would maintain that it is even encouraged. 'And,' they add, 'it is sincere belief in God that matters; all the rest is of no importance'. But what if 'the rest' makes this sincerity impossible? Let us consider what sort of faith is 'encouraged' by the modern Western world. What place, in other words, does its educational system allot to Christianity? Generally speaking, and always allowing for exceptions, it would be true to say that in most of their lessons, partly through what they are taught and partly owing to the general outlook that all too clearly prevails among the teachers, the pupils are indoctrinated

with the modern pseudo-religion; and in the hour or two a week set aside for the study of the Bible they are given a glimpse of an opposite perspective, though the contradictions are presented as 'tactfully' as possible, always at the expense of religion. In some cases the first chapters of Genesis are omitted; in others they are taught without comment; in others they are taught as 'myths' in the modern ignoble misuse of that noble word. The pupils' attention is for the most part unlikely to be drawn to the fact that Christianity has some of its deepest roots in these very chapters, to the point that if they are false, then so is it. But a little reflection will bring this out; nor does religion, lukewarmly, fragmentarily, apologetically presented as it is, stand much chance when the pupils are faced with a serious choice between it and modernism. The result is that those who cling to their already precarious faith instinctively block their own channels of spiritual thought, and by a kind of self-imposed mental paralysis, scarcely daring to think about their religion, they sacrifice a vital aspect of sincerity as defined by Christ in his first commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy mind'; and it is precisely this part of the commandment that depends most on human initiative, the part that we should be best able, by our own efforts, to fulfil, though the question of grace can never be absent.

An eminent prisoner within this framework of mental paralysis is Teilhard de Chardin, who also blocks the main and obvious channels of thought in his desperate attempts to combine religion with evolutionism. His appeal lies in his providing certain ingeniously devised side channels which relieve the paralytic by keeping up an illusion of normal mental activity. In other words, with an extraordinary capacity for turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to this and that, he creates a kind of mental hubbub in order to drown

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the voice of reason, refusing altogether to put to himself the following questions which, for anyone who has received a modern Western education, loudly cry out to be asked:

If God exists, as we are taught to believe, and if evolution is a scientific fact, as we are forbidden to doubt, what sort of being can God be? Why did He choose to turn mankind back towards the past in longing for a lost Paradise, and to leave them so turned, in all parts of the world, for thousands of years, if He knew that the truth lay in just the opposite direction? Why could He not have taught them about evolution to begin with? Or at least brought them gradually to it, instead of allowing religion after religion to repeat and confirm the same old way of thinking? And why did He allow this to culminate, at any rate for the Western world, in a religion that perhaps more inextricably than any other is bound up with the doctrine of the Fall of man?¹⁶ And why, having prevented all His prophets from divulging evolution, did He allow a mere layman to stumble upon it and to propagate it in defiance of all spiritual authorities of the day, thereby causing millions of people to lose their faith in religion and in Him?

'God moves in a mysterious way', some will argue, in a frantic attempt to retain both God and evolutionism. But you cannot sew up a gaping chasm with such a needle and thread. Seek to retain these two incompatibles, and you will be left with a deity who is not the Lord of All Mystery but a subhuman monster of incompetence, which is precisely what Teilhardism implies of God.¹⁷ But outside the

¹⁶ Islam is just as explicit about the Fall as Christianity is, but unlike Christianity it is not centred on any historical redeeming sacrifice in view of the Fall.

¹⁷ This escapes the notice of Teilhardists because they are not really interested in God. Neither was Teilhard de Chardin himself, as he makes clear in the following confession: 'If in consequence of some inner subversion, I should lose successively my faith in Christ, my faith in a personal god, my

very special climate of this pseudomystical fantasy, one only needs to be able to put two and two together to see that either evolutionism or God must go; and modern education begins to tip the scale in favour of evolutionism at an increasingly early age.

'First of all Copernicus, and the discovery that the earth moves round the sun; then Darwin, and the discovery that men have evolved from apes.' Such is the train of thought which is encouraged to prevail. It is never pointed out that the implicit logic is false, that there is no comparison between the two men in question, and that their respective theories did not even result from the same processes of thought, inasmuch as Darwin's theory is pure hypothesis. This last fact is in any case unknown to most of the teachers, who in their own youth were misled as they now mislead. So the seemingly unanswerable and conclusive argument of the two discoveries is left unquestioned,¹⁸ to seep into the souls of the young and to eliminate there all respect for tradition, while 'proving' the validity of modern scepticism. It is therefore not surprising that many Westerners, even before they have left school, have already opted, if not for atheism, at least for an agnostic reserve of judgement that they, like their parents, will probably never see fit to unreserve. But a normally functioning mind, which is just what they are systematically deprived of—that is, a mind

faith in the Spirit, it seems to me that I would continue to believe in the world. The world—the value, the infallibility and the goodness of the world—this is, in the last analysis, the first and only thing in which I believe.' See Kurt Almquist, 'Aspects of Teilhardian Idolatry', in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer–Autumn, 1978.

¹⁸ If questioned at all, the argument dissolves into nothing, for the one discovery worthy of the name, that of Copernicus, was more in the nature of a rediscovery, since there is reason to suppose that the fact in question was known to some of the ancients. None the less, it is also a cosmological fact that the sun appears to go round the earth, and the human race will no doubt continue to speak of sunrise and sunset for as long as this world exists.

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neither warped by rationalism nor spellbound by materialist scientism—would have no difficulty, when faced by the above questions, in finding the right answer and in razing the 'card house' of modern ideology to the ground.

'What then,' it may be asked, 'should we teach?' The answer is: as far as possible the whole truth, which would mean teaching many truths which were not taught in better times, for the needs of the eleventh hour are not the same as those of the sixth or seventh. By way of example, let the young be taught, towards the end of their schooling, that many scientists have conjectured—but in no sense proved—that mankind has evolved from a lower species. This conjecture is an incident in the history of our day. But let them be taught at the same time that the theory in question, which has only crossed the mind of man in relatively recent years, is the exact opposite not merely of what the Bible teaches us but also of the unanimous opinion of the whole pre-Biblical world in all parts of the globe. In particular, the tradition of the four ages of the temporal cycle, Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron, which dominated the perspective of classical antiquity, going back into the shadows of prehistory, has also been prevalent from equally ancient times among the Hindus and the American Indians.¹⁹ Or to take one aspect of the evolutionary conjecture, namely that human language evolved from the inarticulate sounds of animals, let it be pointed out that although the origin of language is beyond investigation, linguistic science can none the less take us back to a very remote past, and it teaches us that the oldest languages are the most complex and majestic, while being also the richest in variety of consonantal sounds. All languages in use today have devolved from more elaborate languages which they have

¹⁹ Joseph E. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 9.

simplified and in general mutilated and corrupted. Devolution, not evolution, is also the fate of many word meanings. All students should be made to study the already mentioned degradation of the word 'intellect'. It is a scientific fact that throughout the ancient world the concept of man's faculties was more exalted and of wider scope than it is today.

Let the traditional and the modern concepts of the universe—or, if one prefers it, of reality—be placed side by side. According to typically modern thought, 'reality' is supposed to have originally consisted of the material world alone. It is said that life must have been 'sparked off', in some as yet unexplained way, from matter, and that living organisms developed psychic faculties, first of all the senses, then sentiment and memory, and then, as man himself gradually evolved, imagination and reason. According to the traditional explanation, on the other hand, it is not the higher which proceeds from the lower but the lower from the higher; nor is existence limited to the psychic and the corporeal. The Supreme Origin—and End—of all things is Absolute Truth, which alone has Reality in the full sense, and which manifests or creates, at lesser degrees of reality, the whole of existence.²⁰ The traditional theory of existence, common to all religions, is summed up in the Islamic holy²¹ tradition: 'I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known, and so I created the world.' The psychic and the corporeal, soul and body, are the two lowest levels of reality, and together they constitute what we call 'this

²⁰ The etymological sense of this word, from *ex + sistere*, 'to stand out from' is relevant to our context, for which existence is distinct from Being. God Alone is; from His Being existence proceeds and is ultimately reintegrated into It.

²¹ So called because in it the Divinity speaks in the first person on the tongue of the Prophet.

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world'. Above them is the domain of the Spirit, known as 'the next world' from the standpoint of life on earth, but first in order of creation, for it is no less than the primal 'overflow' of the Divine Reality Itself. From that immediate reflection of the Hidden Treasure, the psychic domain is a projected image which in its turn projects the bodily domain.

The language of symbolism, which is part of man's primordial heritage, is based on this hierarchy of the different degrees of the universe. A symbol is not something arbitrarily chosen by man to illustrate a higher reality; it does so precisely because it is rooted in that reality, which has projected it, like a shadow or a reflection, onto the plane of earth. Every terrestrial object is the outcome of a series of projections, from Divine to spiritual, from spiritual to psychic, from psychic to corporeal. But on this lowest plane which is the remotest of all from the Divine Archetypes, and which, being deployed in time and in space, undergoes an extremity of differentiation and fragmentation, it is necessary to distinguish between peripheral objects that are no more than faint and fragmentary reflections and the more central objects of each domain, that is, of each subdivision of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. The term symbol is reserved for those most direct manifestations which reflect their archetypes with the greatest clarity and which thus have the power to bring about a 'remembrance', in the Platonic sense, of the transcendent truth that is symbolized.

In every domain there are orders of precedence which are still felt but no longer, for the most part, understood. The criterion of an object's rank is its symbolic value. By way of example, gold takes precedence over other metals, just as amongst stones the diamond, the ruby, the sapphire and the emerald rank highest, and all these are powerfully

symbolic. In a different domain, the same can be said of such insects as the bee, the butterfly and the spider. In particular the symbolism of the spider is very relevant to our context, for it would be incapable of weaving its web from its own substance if creation were not woven out of the substance of the Creator. Nor could the web take the form of concentric circles in ever receding distance from the centre if the Divine Creative Act did not project the planes of existence in a hierarchy of degrees, each subsequent plane being more remote from its Divine Origin. Nor again could the spider have its centrality and almost at the same time the agile omnipresence which gives it a comprehensive authority over the web if the Infinite and Eternal Truth were not mysteriously both Centre and Encompasser of all creation. In this connection we may refer back to the already mentioned rediscovery made by Copernicus, for the metaphysical reconciliation between geocentrism and heliocentrism is closely related to the two Divine Aspects we have just spoken of. On the plane of this world, both man and the sun are outstanding as manifestations or reflections of the Divinity, who is represented as Centre by the factual centrality of the sun and as Encompasser by the sun's phenomenal orbit round the earth. Inversely, in the case of man, the Divine Centre is symbolized by his phenomenal centrality, whereas the factual orbit of man's earth round the sun is an image of the Divine Encompassing. Considered in this way, both the ignorance of the geocentrists and the enlightenment of the heliocentrists appear to be less absolute than they are often made out to be.

Without knowledge of the basic traditional concepts which are the theme of these last paragraphs it is impossible to understand ancient thought and therefore, amongst other things, sacred art, which speaks the language of symbolism. Moreover it may be noticed that without the

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doctrine of the different degrees of universal existence, a whole section of words—not only intellect—becomes unusable, at any rate according to the meanings which alone justify their existence. Specifically modern thought, which refuses to believe that there is anything above the psychic level, thereby denies itself the right to such words as 'metaphysical' and 'transcendent'. Even the word 'wisdom' is in jeopardy—or would be if it were not possible to qualify it with the epithet 'worldly'—for without the sense of hierarchy and a knowledge of metaphysical truths there could not even be the first glimmerings of what our remote ancestors understood by 'wisdom'.

Once the exact relationship between science and evolutionism has been established, and once the traditional doctrine of creation has been explained in a way that does justice²² to it, that is, a way which is universal enough to escape from the limitations of one particular perspective, and to open the door to a symbolic interpretation of whatever imagery may be used, then the Darwinist hypothesis is in danger, to say the least, of losing its hold. At the same time, in the light of the science of symbols, a new significance is seen in many features of sacred texts which are often dismissed as childish by the so-called higher criticism. The whole doctrine of the degrees of existence is implicit in what is said on the first page of the Old Testament about 'the dividing of the waters',²³ which is itself in fact the main division in the hierarchy of created

²² It has to be admitted that the religious fundamentalists, with their altogether literal interpretation of sacred texts have done much to undermine the traditional outlook in the eyes of many of those who are potentially intelligent but spiritually uninformed. Few things do more to further the acceptance of evolutionism than the fundamentalist assertion that the world was created in 4004 B.C.

²³ For a parallel in Hinduism see René Guénon, *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*, chapter v (closing paragraphs).

things, the separation of the domain of the soul and the body from the domain of the Spirit.²⁴ Or let us take another example, the creation of man 'on the sixth day', which is highly significant, in the literal sense of the adverb here used. According to the symbolism of numbers, four denotes the terrestrial state, whence the quaternaries characteristic of it such as elements, seasons and directions. Five denotes man's place at the centre of this state, his quintessentiality, whereas six, being 5 + 1, completes the full status of man by adding the transcendent dimension in virtue of which he is mediator²⁵ between Heaven and earth.

'The human form marks not only the summit of earthly creatures, but also—and for that very reason—the exit from their condition, or from the *samsara* as the Buddhists would say. To see man is to see not only the image of God but also a door open towards Bodhi, liberating Illumination; or let us say towards a blessed establishment in the divine Nearness . . . The animal, which can manifest perfections but not the Absolute, is like a closed door, as it were enclosed in its own perfection; whereas man is like an open door that allows him to escape his limits, which are those of the world rather than his own . . . The splendour of the stag excludes that of the lion, the eagle cannot be a swan, nor the water-lily the rose . . . only man is the image-synthesis of the Creator, by his possession of the intellect—thus also of reason and language—and by his manifestation of it through his very form.'²⁶

For the evolutionist the whole issue is obscured by the

²⁴ That is, in its created aspect, for the Spirit has also and above all a Divine Aspect.

²⁵ It may be noted in this connection that in Arabic the letter *waw* and in Hebrew the letter *vav* both have the numerical value of six, and each constitutes, in its respective language, the linguistic mediator, namely the word 'and'.

²⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 87.

absence from his perspective of any notion of normality. For him the human norm, which in its corporeal aspect is the theme of this last quotation, is a matter of fluctuating opinion. His beliefs oblige him, despite himself, to maintain that what might have seemed a norm for one age will be rejected by subsequent ages as 'primitive'. We say 'despite himself' because notwithstanding the widespread degeneration of the human race that shows itself above all in faces, almost everyone alive today has seen at least one or two examples of human beauty which bear the imprint of the Absolute and which, as his instinct must tell him, are therefore un-outdatable norms.

A book that is particularly relevant to our present context is *From the Divine to the Human*, one of Frithjof Schuon's recent works. Its title proclaims in advance its timeliness for a world which, during the last hundred years or more, has been largely dominated by a supposition that might be expressed: 'from the subhuman to the human'. Schuon draws our attention to the significance of certain basic characteristics which all men have in common and which, if duly weighed, make it impossible to believe in the primacy of matter. There is not one of us who is not aware of powers within which are at an incomparably higher level than anything outward and visible. They could be summed up as our subjectivity and our objectivity, our subjective consciousness of being 'I', which is inextricably bound up with the mystery of life, and our objective intelligence, which is capable of grasping truths that infinitely transcend our empirical experience.

An argument of great importance which has been neglected by the official representatives of religion is that 'the ideas of the "Great Spirit" and the primacy of the Invisible are natural to man, a fact which does not need to be demonstrated', and that, 'what is natural to human con-

sciousness proves *ipso facto* its essential truth inasmuch as the intelligence exists for no other reason than to be adequate to reality.' Analogously we could say that the existence of the ear proves the existence of sound; or as Schuon remarks: 'We have heard it said that the wings of birds prove the existence of air, and that in the same way the religious phenomenon, common *a priori* to all peoples, proves the existence of its content, namely God and the after-life: which is to the point if one takes the trouble to examine the argument in depth'.²⁷ The symbolism here is in itself illuminating, for religion gives man 'wings' and the air in question is the domain of the Transcendent for which those wings are made and the reality of which they 'prove'. It is true that such proofs are 'inaccessible to certain minds'; but Schuon gives also arguments of common sense, such as might convince some of those who are not—or not yet—open to demonstrations on a higher plane.

'Those who uphold the evolutionist argument of an intellectual progress like to explain religious and metaphysical ideas by inferior psychological factors, such as fear of the unknown, childish hope of perpetual happiness, attachment to an imagery that has become dear, escape into dreams, and the desire to oppress others at small expense *et cetera*; how can one fail to see that such suspicions, presented shamelessly as demonstrated facts, comprise psychological inconsequences and impossibilities which cannot escape any impartial observer? If humanity was stupid for thousands of years, one cannot explain how it could have ceased being so, especially since this is supposed to have happened in a relatively very short space of time; and one can explain it still less when one observes with what intelligence and heroism it was stupid for so long and with what philosophic

²⁷ *From the Divine to the Human*, p. 6.

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shortsightedness and moral decadence it has finally become "lucid" and "adult".²⁸

On a considerably lower plane, but still in the context of much needed arguments neglected by religious authorities, let us revert briefly to the scientific refutations of evolution, more of which are now available²⁹ than the two books already mentioned. Such writings would be less necessary if evolutionist scientists were not so 'religiously' bent on converting men to the belief that the rise of the human from the subhuman is a proven fact. But things being as they are, it might have been expected that the various Christian Churches, and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, would not fail to take advantage of these refutations as powerful dispellers of an illusion which has drawn so many souls away from religion. No doubt under Pope Pius XII, the church would have made full use of such publications. But since his death, the Vatican has become interested above all in adapting Christianity to modern ideas and in showing that it is no longer 'behind the times'. It is not to be imagined that the man who made the following pronouncement could possibly be interested in a refutation of evolutionism; the speaker here is Paul VI; the occasion, the landing of the astronauts on the moon in 1971: 'Honour to Man, honour to thought, honour to science, honour to technique, honour to work, honour to the boldness of man, honour to the synthesis of scientific and organising ability of man who, unlike other animals, knows how to give his spirit and his manual dexterity these instruments of conquest. Honour to man king of the earth,

²⁸ Ibid. p. 12.

²⁹ For example, *Cosmos and Transcendence* (Breaking through the Barrier of Scientific Belief) by Wolfgang Smith; *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, by Michael Denton; and *Adam and Evolution* by Michael Pitman.

'And from him that hath no! . . .' 43

and today Prince³⁰ of heaven'.³¹ Later in the same year, he said: 'We moderns, men of our own day, wish everything to be new. Our old people, the Traditionalists, the Conservatives, measured the value of things according to their enduring quality. We instead, are actualists, we want everything to be new all the time, to be expressed in a continually improvised and dynamically unusual form.'³²

He had already defined the 'Post-conciliar Church' by saying that it 'seeks to adapt itself to the languages, to the customs and to the inclinations of the men of our times, men completely engrossed in the rapidity of material evolution'. He also said: 'From the start the Council has propagated a wave of serenity and optimism, a Christianity that is exciting and positive, loving life, mankind and earthly values', and he added that the Council had 'an intention of making Christianity acceptable and lovable, indulgent and open, free from mediaeval rigourism and from the pessimistic understanding of man and his customs'.³³

As to the present holder of the papal office, although, ironically enough, he is often referred to as a 'conservative', this does not apply to the essentials of worship, namely the Sacraments and the Liturgy. He is moreover, like Montini, an avowed admirer of Teilhard de Chardin, with an unbounded enthusiasm for modern man as such; and his choice of the name John-Paul was incontestably a pledge to maintain the innovations of his predecessors. In a word, until the death of Pope Pius XII, there was still one

³⁰ It was the speaker of this 'litany' who eliminated, amongst other things, the prayer to St Michael, Prince of the Heavenly Hosts, at the end of the Mass.

³¹ *Doc. Cath.*, No. 1580. See Rama Coomaraswamy, *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition*, p. 95.

³² *Ibid.* p. 92.

³³ *Doc. Cath.* No. 1538.

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powerful organization in the West which implacably condemned the pseudo-religion of the modern world. But now that sole voice of condemnation has joined itself to the voices of complicity; and this cannot be without significance in relation to the question with which the chapter opened.

4

The Political Extreme

THE ANALYSIS of a majority outlook which was the theme of the last chapter calls for something analogous in the domain of politics. It is often said that nations have the governments they deserve; and although many cases spring to mind of nations which might seem to merit better governments than they actually have, it is none the less true that unless there be interference from outside, a prevailing outlook is liable to bring down upon itself that form of rule which most nearly corresponds to it.

A passing comparison has already been made between the Communist world and those Western countries which are still officially—or almost officially—a part of Christendom. To be altogether inclusive, we could simply follow the common practice of speaking of 'the free world' and 'the Communist world' or 'the two sides of the iron curtain'; and a glance at the free world shows us that apart from a few relatively small exceptions, it is, as regards essentials, not much less uniform than the Communist world. In other words, the present day has little more than two possibilities of government to offer; and that limitation, considering what those possibilities are, is yet another significant sign of the times. To see it as such, we need only step for a moment outside the modern world in order to take a look at

politics from a traditional standpoint, and one way of doing this will be to consider the whole question in the light of Plato's theory of government.

When Plato wrote his *Politeia* which might be translated 'State' or 'Polity', but which is most often, misleadingly, referred to as his 'Republic', he was answering a question which has been prominent in the minds of many thinking men and women of the Western world ever since the end of the Middle Ages: 'What is the ideal form of government?' If this question was not asked at other periods and in other regions, it was simply because, for the people concerned, it was not a question, the answer being too well known. Plato was a sage, but not a heavenly inspired and God-sent legislator, and he could therefore do no more than define his ideal state in theory. None the less, although his concept may seem highly questionable in some of its details, it corresponds in its essentials to every solution of Providence known to history inasmuch as it is no less than government according to transcendent principles which are summed up in the Absolute Good (*to Agathón*).¹ It is this essential aspect of Plato's state which concerns us here, and not its details.

But his epilogue is also directly related to our theme; for having made his definition, he remarks that even if his theory could be realized, even if such a state as he envisages could be actually established, it would be bound to lose its perfection and decline. 'Although a state so constituted will not easily be shaken, yet since all that is brought into existence is doomed to decay, even such a constitution as this will not endure forever but must needs come to dissolution.'² He then traces the different stages of decline, and in doing so he is foretelling, in general terms, much of

¹ Plato, *Politeia*, vi, 508.

² Ibid. viii, 546.

what has happened since his day in various parts of the world. Aristocracy (rule by the best) is what Plato calls his ideal; then would follow timocracy, then oligarchy, then democracy, then tyranny. To convey Plato's conception in modern parlance, and keeping the term democracy, we could say theocracy for aristocracy and dictatorship or demagoguery for tyranny. It is less easy to find a satisfactory term for the second and third forms of government, though it is clear that they can be taken together because they are structurally the same and because it is impossible to say exactly where one ends and the other begins. Moreover both are oligarchies—'rule by the few', that is, in most cases, a king and his peers, or a king and his favourites. Timocracy could be defined in Hindu terms as rule by Kshatriyas,³ who have partly thrown off the authority of the Brahmins but who remain more or less true to their own nature; this becomes plutocracy—an alternative name which Plato gives for oligarchy, his third form of government—when for want of the upward pull of the cast above them, the nature of the Kshatriya rulers sinks downwards in the direction of the Vaisyas.⁴ For want of a better term we could put these two governments jointly under the heading of traditional or principled autocracy, in virtue of the structural continuity which they have with the highest form of government, and because the principles are still recognized, however much they may come to be violated in fact.

It may be objected that the term 'traditional autocracy' or 'principled autocracy' is ambiguous, to which the obvious answer would be that the thing itself is not without ambiguity. In any case, it goes without saying that the words 'traditional' and 'principled' must be taken in a

³ The princely caste.

⁴ The merchant caste.

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relative sense, since it is not traditional for the temporal power to be altogether autocratic, that is, independent of the spiritual authority. The form of government in question, being itself a breakaway from theocracy, is clearly less principled than the highest form of government. It none the less belongs to 'the old order of things' and is definitely on the side of tradition, though it is liable to end by bringing tradition into disrepute. Moreover autocracy is in itself dangerous owing to the highly explosive and volatile nature of human individuality in which it is vested; and there is always the risk that without any structural change a principled autocracy may become a *de facto* unprincipled dictatorship. To take one example, this could be said to have happened towards the end of the reign of Henry VIII, who had previously been principled enough to earn the title 'Defender of the Faith'.

Such exceptions apart, the next stage on the path of decline after principled autocracy is democracy in which, according to Plato, the dominant notions are liberty and equality. In this respect his concept coincides with the modern one. Democracy is also, in his opinion, the harbinger of demagoguery or dictatorship; and although no twentieth century democrat likes to think of it in this way, recent history has not proved that Plato is wrong, to say the least. Since degeneration tends to follow an undulating course, there are likely to be partial redresses here and there and from time to time which might seem, quite wrongly, to give the lie to Plato who is merely stating general tendencies and would have been the first to admit that degeneration is not a straight downward slope. It is always possible, for example, that when a democracy ends in chaos, as it seems fated often to do, a principled autocrat may come to the rescue instead of the much to be dreaded unprincipled demagogue. Such was the case in recent Spanish history

when Franco re-established a principled autocracy, that is, a Christian kingdom, with himself as regent, thus saving his country from a communist dictatorship. The democracy which preceded this restoration was very short-lived; and sometimes, owing to the lack of resistance inherent in this form of government, a democracy may be superseded at the moment of birth.

The French Revolution was democratic in its original intention—witness the slogan *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (the meaningless third term being thrown in as a sop to human sentiment)—but in fact the fall was too precipitous to stop at democracy, so that the change from principled autocracy to unprincipled demagoguery was almost direct. The time was not yet ripe however for this lowest form of government to last, and it was superseded by Napoleon's relatively principled autocracy. But 125 years later, what might be called cosmic or cyclic pressures had changed, and Russia has had no Napoleon to save her from almost 70 years of what is probably the lowest ebb to which government can sink. It is not however the lowest form of government which inaugurates the rejection of principles. To pave the way for unprincipled dictatorship, the principles have first of all to be rejected by democracy⁵ in the name of 'liberty'. For Plato true liberty is no less than the escape from the 'cave' of this world and its limitations. The way of escape which he calls 'the rugged and steep ascent' is 'the narrow gate' of the Gospels, 'and few are they that find it'. These few are the philosophers who would be the rulers of Plato's aristocracy, and whose task it is to see that their subjects are directed towards the transcendent principles and therefore towards the narrow gate beyond which the principles lie. To face in this direction necessarily means the curtailing of a lower

⁵ Already in democracy, according to Plato, the principles are 'trampled under foot'. (VIII, 558).

liberty—a discipline which is tolerated so long as the philosophers are there to remind their subjects that it is for the sake of a higher liberty.

Every theocracy is grounded on the truth that this life is no more than a bridge to the next, and on the rule 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (the necessities of this world) shall be added unto you.' (Matthew, VII, 33)—a truth and a rule which are formulated in various ways from religion to religion, and which can never be absent. But degeneration, which nothing in this world can escape, means moving away from the principles. The movement does not at first necessitate a change of orientation: communities slip slowly backwards down 'the steep ascent' while still looking up towards the narrow gate which marks its summit. But gradually the justification of the discomfort of facing in this direction is lost sight of, until there comes a point when the majority of people decide to turn their backs on the principles. This means an immediate and powerful sensation of liberty—for 'wide is the gate and broad is the way'—but it is liberty on a lower plane. As Frithjof Schuon writes: 'In all cases of this kind, heaven—or a heaven—is shut off from above us without our noticing the fact and we discover in compensation an earth long unappreciated, or so it seems to us, a homeland which opens its arms to welcome its children and wants to make us forget all lost Paradises.'⁶ Very relevant also is what he says in particular of the Renaissance which was one of the great milestones of decline in Western Europe: 'Man as such had become to all intents and purposes good, and the earth too had become good and looked immensely rich and unexplored; instead of living only "by halves" one could at last live fully, be fully man

⁶ *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 29.

and fully on earth; one was no longer a kind of half-angel, fallen and exiled; one had become a whole being, but by the downward path.⁷

The turning of one's back on the principles does not yet mean that they are totally disregarded. That is only the case when a later stage is reached, which corresponds to the establishment of the democratic state. With regard to this and to the even less principled system that it often leads to, our own times are particularly instructive. We are living in the very age of democracy and dictatorship, since these are the inevitable outcome of moving away from the principles, and it is at the end of the temporal cycle that man is furthest from his transcendent origins. Let us therefore consider, in the 'light' of our times, a significant feature of each of these two lowest forms of government. As regards democracy it may be noted that the so-called 'free world' is not so free as to have escaped from compulsory education. 'Equality' has here been given precedence over 'liberty'. Everyone must be given 'an equal chance' for the start of life. This means that everyone must be indoctrinated with relativism. Pupils are taught that our ancestors believed in principles which they regarded as absolute, but that in our day the principles are questioned by most 'thinking people'. There is practically never any suggestion that certain kinds of knowledge are more important than others. To establish a hierarchy would be to violate the very notion of equality and to paralyse 'freedom of thought'. It is impressed on all that every man, woman, boy and girl have a right to their own opinions, unless they can be proved wrong logically or scientifically. Otherwise unusual opinions may be applauded for their originality. Everyone is encouraged to think for himself or herself; but the manner of

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 29-30.

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teaching ensures, as we have already seen, that the ground is steeply sloped in favour of agnosticism, progressivism and evolutionism.

Under the lowest form of government a compulsory uniform 'official' education teaches categorically that religion was a purely human invention for the purpose of intimidating and oppressing the mass of the people, and that the principles simply do not exist. In a word, our times have taught us that the difference between democracy and dictatorship is as the difference between allowing evil (and therefore also good) and enforcing evil.⁸

It follows from what has been said about political decline that the so-called 'free world' of today is liable to be more or less in danger of losing its freedom, inasmuch as democracy is so often no more than a state of transition from principled autocracy to unprincipled tyranny. The would-be tyrants never fail to exploit 'the liberty to abolish liberty' which democracy holds out to them with all its other liberties. Moreover in every 'free' country there is a sector—varying greatly in size from nation to nation—which has already been won over to the other side. But the danger is too obvious to escape the notice of those who value their freedom, and in many of those countries where the demagogic sector is relatively small there has been a marked stiffening in favour of conservation, which makes the democracy in question far less precarious. At the best it even confers on it something of the function of a defender of principles and an upholder of tradition; and the more a democracy is still penetrated with the residues of principled autocracy, the more resistant it is likely to be against unprincipled tyranny.

⁸ Not that Plato was unaware of this, since according to him the demagogue or tyrant, inasmuch as he 'purges' the state of all its best elements, leaving

If our times are instructive at the lowest level, no times are less instructive as regards the nature of theocracy. The most recent of Providence's solutions to the problem of government was realized some 1400 years ago with the founding of the first Islamic state in Medina. At its outset it was miraculously successful. The initial perfection was short-lived, although thanks to detailed records it remains to this day as an ideal, an example and a criterion. Every effort has been made to keep it clear in the minds of men, and Islam has in a sense lived on it throughout the centuries. Embodying as it does the practices and recommendations of the God-sent Messenger, this ideal constitutes the second spiritual authority of the religion, the first being the Revelation itself. The third authority, incomparably less than the other two, with no power to make any fundamental changes whatsoever, lies in a certain consensus of reliable opinion among Muslims themselves. But if the spiritual authority among men is limited in Islam, it is by compensation exceedingly widespread. It is sometimes affirmed that every man is a priest; at any rate, there is no laity, and it cannot be denied that a sharp and implacable awareness of what God has ordained and what the Prophet has recommended is to be found in a multitude of individuals throughout the Islamic world. After the first four Caliphs, who continue to be revered as Saints, the highest posts have been held by relatively few good men. The saying 'Power and Paradise go not together' soon came to be accepted almost as a truism. But the dearth of good rulers was unable to shake the theocracy in its immutable adamant structure. Thanks to this, and to the widespread spiritual alertness among believers, the world of Islam was

only the worst, is the exact opposite of the healer. When speaking of the healer he no doubt has in mind the philosopher-kings who would rule his aristocracy.

able to take other severe tests in its stride. A pagan conqueror like Hulagu, grandson of Ghengis Khan, could sweep over Persia, Iraq and Syria, raze Baghdad, the seat of the caliphate, to the ground, put most of its men to the sword, including the Caliph and all his family. But what then? The lands in question—it was 1258 AD—were only governable in one way. By the end of the century the Mongol dynasty had become the champions of Islam and the lavish patrons of its arts. Such also was the destiny which awaited the even more destructive Tamburlaine and his successors in the next century. Needless to say, Islam is not the only true religion to have absorbed its pagan conquerors. Other analogous examples are to be found elsewhere, but those we have just mentioned are particularly striking, and they are significant also, as we shall see, in view of their place in the temporal cycle.

Modernists argue that in such cases the conquered civilization was only able to prevail owing to the limitations of the conquerors, who had nothing positive to offer. What they have in mind is obvious, but it is grounded on more than one error, including the total failure to see the modern so-called 'civilization' from any standpoint but its own, which they themselves incarnate. Seen in a wider perspective, the thing in question appears as nothing other than an inevitable aspect of extreme old age—the old age of the world. It cannot rightly be called a civilization if we are to go on speaking of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic civilizations, to take only four examples, which are the most important. The purpose of all these—and of their analogues—was to preserve such of man's primordial heritage as had been partially restored by the Revelations on which their respective religions are based, and to retard the inevitable process of degeneration. Of all that they stood for, the modern 'civilization' is the direct antithesis,

for it is nothing other than an organized system of subversion and degeneration. Instead of trying to resist the natural downward tendencies of man, the movement away from the principles, from the higher to the lower, from the inward to the outward, it welcomes and encourages them in the name of progress and evolution.

The impact of the West on the traditional civilizations has been to accelerate greatly a process of degeneration which was already taking place, and to give them, as it were, a sideways push to ensure that they went downhill by a steeper and somewhat different course from the one they were following. The world of Islam has had more than 700 years in which to degenerate since the sack of Baghdad, and its people are correspondingly less resistant. But despite the new direction and the new speed that its degeneration has taken, the Islamic civilization is still relatively within reach.

A Christian civilization in the full sense of the term is, on the contrary, out of reach. Plato stresses the extreme importance of externals in the ideal state, namely that people should be surrounded from their earliest years by the right objects; and it has been a marked characteristic of every theocratic civilization known to history that its outward features, including garments, were determined and controlled according to the principles of sacred art. Already a betrayal in this respect was the Church's acceptance of the Renaissance, which has remained as an almost insurmountable barrier between Western Europe and Christendom in the fullest sense of this term.

In any case, the Western world is no longer theocratically governable. No community in the West is sufficiently open to transcendent truths for there to be so much as a necessary minimum of individuals capable of discerning the difference between a legally enforced restraint based on those truths

and a tyranny based on arbitrary human opinion. From the point of view of modern democratic education, both the restraints in question are tyrannies. How few are capable of distinguishing, for example, between a principled autocracy like that of recent Spain, and dictatorships like those of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao; and if a principled autocracy is labelled tyranny, how much less tolerance would there be for theocracy, which would necessarily interfere with men's lives in far more intimate details. How little understood was the recent tragedy of traditional Tibet! The brutality of its overthrow was abhorred, and so was the tyrannical nature of the act; but few Western tears were shed for what was lost.⁹ The fact, however, that such a theocracy could have existed so recently suggests that the situation in the East is still very different from that in the West, despite the spell that is cast upon Orientals by modern science and modern inventions, and despite the impact of Western education. In most of the East the principles are still recognized; and if something can be shown to be in obedience to them, there is a chance that it may be tolerated.

These remarks should not be allowed to engender any sanguine illusions about the state of the world. But it may well be asked how far anything in the nature of a political restoration might now be possible, nor could any assessment of the present day be complete without giving that question some sort of answer. Let us therefore consider once again, by way of example, that particular religious community which was founded by the most recent of the God-sent messengers and which has thus had less time than others to

⁹ The modern civilization had been expressly excluded from Tibet. Not even a bicycle was allowed across the frontier. What tyranny! And how Socrates would have applauded it!

degenerate. Firstly, it must be remembered that a providential intervention which establishes a new religion may be said to have, in virtue of the immensity of its scope, a double aspect. There are elements which wholly or partly escape from time, and there are elements which are subject to time. As we have already seen in another connection,¹⁰ the spirituality which is established with the new religion is itself above time, and therefore does not have to grow or develop, but begins at its highest point. This point corresponds in Islam to the presence of Muhammad and his Companions, and in Christianity to the presence of Christ and his Apostles. From such a summit there can only be a decline; but the Prophet of Islam promised 'God will send to this community, at the head of every hundred years, one who will renew for it its religion'; and there have been analogous graces for all other religions. These renewals are like rhythmic reverberations, echoes of the initial great renewal which brought into existence the religion itself. As such they also may be said to escape in a sense from the domination of time. On the other hand, the outer aspects of a theocracy are subject to time, and therefore to the phases of gradual waxing and waning. The act of Divine Revelation, or the mission of a Divine Messenger, must therefore be said to include the sowing of the seeds of a theocratic civilization which will take a certain time to grow to fullness, and which will then inevitably decay. Its fullness means the realization of outward conditions which are especially favourable to spirituality,¹¹ and which will therefore serve to increase the impact of such of the 'renewals' as take place during this period which they, in their turn, will help to prolong. Once the fullness has been reached, the

¹⁰ See p. 22.

¹¹ See Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, pp. 152-4.

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great function of the spiritual authority and the temporal power is to protect it against change. The excellence of the first century of Islam lay above all in the excellence of its men and women. It had also an outward perfection by reason of its closeness to virgin nature. Unlike Christianity, it was still, at its birth, nomadic or semi-nomadic. The initial Islamic community in Mecca and Medina at the time of the Prophet had, in its outward aspects, the perfection of primordial simplicity. But wherever that simplicity was abandoned, it became immediately clear that an Islamic civilization in the ordinary sense had not yet had time to grow.¹² The seventh century of Islam might perhaps be said to mark the plenitude in question, though clearly one would not want to insist too much on this. Analogously, in speaking of human life, one may prefer not to limit the concept of maturity to one age only. However that may be, the seventh century of Islam¹³—and let us include with it also the eighth—could no doubt be said to correspond to the latest and therefore most accessible point of non-degeneration for the Islamic world. Since then there has been a gradual decline, retarded on the one hand by the 'renewers' who have not ceased to come—although there is less and less that they can achieve except in the domain of esoterism, that is, for a minority—and on the other hand by human efforts of spiritual conservation which the West has been pleased to call 'stagnation'. But it is precisely thanks to this 'stagnation' that the Islamic civilization, unlike the Christian one, could still be pieced together, structurally speaking. It would also probably be true to say that the mass of the people is still theocratically governable in most Islamic countries. But the active and dominant few are not.

¹² To see this, one has only to look, for example, at the remains of the Umayyad palaces in Jericho.

¹³ That is, the thirteenth century AD.

The call for one's country to become 'a modern nation with an internationally acceptable government' is altogether typical of the average 'enlightened' Near and Middle Eastern politician, industrialist, teacher, and their like. Nor in any case could there be an effective return to the Islamic civilization in the true sense so long as the modern civilization still exists, since the two are incompatible. It would be altogether inadequate simply to change the legal system from profane law to Islamic law, which many seem to think is all that need be done. A whole network of far-reaching changes would be necessary, if the civilization were to be spiritually operative.¹⁴ Meantime a minority of intellectuals might re-establish a traditional framework for themselves and have the spiritual benefits it offers, while keeping the modern world at bay by all sorts of compromises which only they would know how to make. But whole nations could become traditionally civilized only if and when the modern 'civilization' is taken from them by force.

When in the past a traditional civilization collapsed, it was inevitably replaced, sooner or later, by another traditional civilization. There was no modern civilization lying in ambush and waiting to take over. The present state of affairs has no parallel in the history of the world; and since it is the external crystallization of the progressist and evolutionist outlook of twentieth-century man, it has been mentioned here as a sign parallel to that more inward sign, and as a parallel answer to the question asked at the outset of the preceding chapter.

¹⁴ There would moreover be need for an extreme subtlety of discrimination to decide exactly what restorations were to be effected and what were to be avoided. Certain superficial aspects of the Islamic civilization are in direct contradiction with Islam's claim to be the primordial religion; and it is much to be doubted whether the restoration of such aspects would be cyclically possible.

5

The Spirit of the Times

ACCORDING to world-wide tradition, the 'life' of the macrocosm consists of thousands of years of spiritual prosperity leading gradually down, from Golden Age to Silver Age to Bronze Age, until it reaches a relatively short final period¹ in which the prosperity is increasingly marred by its opposite. This period, the Iron Age or, as the Hindus term it, the Dark Age, is the late autumn and the winter of the cycle, and it roughly coincides with what is called 'historic' as opposed to 'prehistoric'. All old age, both macrocosmic and microcosmic, has its ills. But normal old age has also its wisdom; and half hidden behind the negative signs which we see on all sides, our day has also something positive to offer which is characteristic of no previous era and which is, as such, yet another sign of the times.

Needless to say, this is not a claim that old age alone is endowed with wisdom, or that, analogously, our times

¹ According to Hinduism, which has the oldest and most explicit doctrine of the cycles, the first age is the longest and the fourth is the shortest. The Genesis commentaries and the Jewish apocryphal books make it clear that there is no mutual contradiction between the perspective of the monotheistic religions and the pre-biblical doctrine of four ages (see *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, pp. 22-3).

excel in that respect—far from it. Humanity is the heart of the macrocosm and the four ages of the cycle are what they are according to the state of mankind. The pre-excellence of the Golden Age derives from the spirituality—which implies wisdom—of mankind in general. This whole was subsequently reduced to being no more than a majority which was then reduced to a minority, ultimately a small one. It can none the less be said that there is a mode of wisdom which belongs to old age in particular, and which is even susceptible of being assimilated, to a certain degree, by those who were not wise in youth and middle age. The old age of the cycle is bound to be a congenial setting for it; and the following passage gives us a hint of a collective or macrocosmic wisdom which belongs to our times precisely by reason of their lateness.

'The usual religious arguments, through not probing sufficiently to the depth of things and moreover not having previously had any need to do so, are psychologically somewhat outworn and fail to satisfy certain requirements of causality. If human societies degenerate on the one hand with the passage of time, they accumulate on the other hand experiences in virtue of old age, however intermingled with errors these may be. This paradox is something that any pastoral teaching intended to be effective should take into account, not by drawing new directives from the general error, but on the contrary by using arguments of a higher order, intellectual rather than sentimental.'²

In the phrase 'human societies' the plural reminds us that the modern world is not the only human world that has degenerated with the passage of time. Each of the four ages may be said to constitute in itself a lesser cycle, beginning with a 'youth' and ending with an 'eld'; and there are yet

² Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 53-4.

lesser cycles within them—for example, the civilization of ancient Egypt, or that of ancient Rome. In all these lesser cycles there must have been in some degree, towards the end, an accumulation of 'experience in virtue of old age'. The twentieth century is the final phase of that particular human society which may be said to have been established in Europe—with eventual prolongations—about 1500 years ago. This century marks also, in a parallel way, the final phase of many other societies—Hindu, American Indian, Jewish, Buddhist and Islamic—which have been partially merged into one with the Western world by the superimposition of its way of life over their own traditional differences from it and from each other. But at the same time we are living at the very end of one of the four ages; and since it is the last of the four, its end will be the end of the great cycle of all four ages taken as a whole. In other words, we are now participating in the extreme old age of the macrocosm, which is to be followed by a new cycle of four ages.

It may be objected that in view of the immense length of the cycle the macrocosm could be said to have reached its old age long before the twentieth century. That is true, but the old age in question was overlaid by the youth of subsidiary cycles. Two thousand years ago, the incipient twilight of the great cycle receded before the dawn of Christianity, which was followed later by the dawn of Islam; and even as recently as 700 years ago there took place what has been called the 'second birth' of Christianity:³ it was the time of the building of the great cathedrals and the founding of many of the orders of mysticism. Christendom had been allowed a 'fresh flowering', precariously set though it was within the old age of the great cycle. It could

³ The analogous 'second birth' which took place in Islam has already been mentioned (p. 58).

not last: all too quickly and easily it was drawn into the main cosmic current of degeneration, with the result that today there is nothing to modify the greater cycle's old age which is, on the contrary, reinforced by the old age of all the lesser cycles which it contains. It can therefore be said, macrocosmically speaking, that all men alive today, whatever their years, are 'old'; and the question arises, for each individual, which aspect of old age, the positive or the negative, will he or she represent in the macrocosm, that is, in the human collectivity taken as a whole, and how active or passive will each be in this respect.

As regards what Schuon says about pastoral teaching that is no longer effective, the dogma that there is only one valid religion, namely 'ours', may serve as an example of an argument that is 'psychologically somewhat outworn'. Such teachings 'fail to satisfy certain requirements of causality' because they are now seen to defeat one of the main ends of religion which is to bestow a sense of the Glory of God. Modern man cannot help having a broader view of the world than his ancestors had, partly through the destruction of the protective walls of the different traditional civilizations—in itself a tragedy—and partly through the enormously increased facilities of travel and the corresponding increase of information which is poured into his mind through various channels. This broader view may enable him to be impressed by religions other than his own, and at the very least it compels him to see that their existence makes the world-wide spread of his own religion impossible. If they were false, what of the Glory of Him who allowed them to establish themselves, with their millennial roots, over so vast an area?

For those who are not prepared to sacrifice that Glory to human prejudices, it has become abundantly clear that none of the so-called 'world religions' can have been

intended by Providence to establish itself over the whole globe. The question does not arise with those forms of worship like Hinduism and Judaism which are specifically for one people only. But Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, though each is virtually open to everybody, have also beyond doubt their particular sectors of humanity; and though the frontiers may be difficult to define, and though Islam, the most recently revealed of the three, is in the nature of things likely to continue gaining ground in many directions, it seems probable to say the least that the three sectors will remain largely the same until the end of the age. But if such an objective view of religion is widespread, this is not for the most part due to an increase in acuity in the intelligence, but rather to the fact that an 'old man' cannot help being 'experienced'. Otherwise expressed, it is due to a mainly passive participation in the positive aspects of the present age. For anyone who is intellectually active however, this universal outlook is a secondary accompanying asset—albeit none the less necessary—of what may be called 'the spirit of the times'.

To see what is meant by this, let us consider in more detail the characteristics of old age. To speak of the 'old age' of the macrocosm is not merely to speak in metaphor. According to a doctrine that is to be found, variously expressed, in all religions, there is a real analogical correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, a correspondence which is implicit in these terms themselves, 'great world' and 'little world'. This universal doctrine enables us to grasp certain elusive aspects of the macrocosm through the corresponding aspects of the microcosm; and the ambiguous, dividedly dual nature of our times can be better understood if we consider in more detail the old age of the microcosm or, more precisely, of the normal microcosm, for he alone is the true counterpart of the macrocosm.

The word *normal* is used here in its strict sense, as the epithet of that which is a norm: only man as he was created, or one who has regained the primordial state, True Man as the Taoists call him, can be considered as a full microcosm, whose life corresponds to the 'life' of the macrocosm, that is, to the cycle of time which is now nearing its close; and by extension from True Man, that is, from the Saint, we might include in the human norm every truly spiritual man who has at least a virtual wholeness, even if it be not yet fully realized.

Like the macrocosm, the normal microcosm is subject in old age to the tension of two opposite tendencies, a contradiction which in the first part of life was relatively latent and from which, in the Earthly Paradise, man was altogether exempt. This contradiction is due to the imprisonment of an immortal soul in a mortal body, a soul which is moreover in communion with the Spirit. The body is an image of the soul, of which it is also a prolongation. In youth, generally speaking, the body appears as a purely positive symbol and there is perfect harmony between it and the soul. Analogous to this is the harmonious homogeneity of the earlier ages of the macrocosmic cycle. But gradually, in the microcosm, the body begins to show that it is merely a symbol, and that 'merely' becomes more and more aggravated with the passage of time. On the one hand, therefore, there is a gradual bodily deterioration which ends with death; on the other hand there is a mellowing of spirituality. The serene and objective wisdom which is the central characteristic of normal old age outweighs, by its transcendence, the many ills which are the inevitable result of increasing decrepitude,⁴ and in a certain

⁴ By way of example we may consider on the one hand the blindness which befell both Isaac and Jacob in extreme old age, and on the other hand their inward illumination.

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sense it may be said to thrive on them. The corresponding ills of the macrocosm likewise create a climate which is not unfavourable to wisdom on condition that they are seen as ills. Detachment is an essential feature of the sage, and this virtue, which in better times could only be acquired through great spiritual efforts, can be made more spontaneous by the sight of one's world in chaotic ruins.

There is yet another feature of normal old age, the most positive of all, which likewise has its macrocosmic equivalent, in virtue of which our times are unique. It is sometimes said of spiritual men and women at the end of their lives that they have 'one foot already in Paradise'. This is not meant to deny that death is a sudden break, a rupture of continuity. It cannot but be so, for it has to transform mortal old age into immortal youth. None the less, hagiography teaches us that the last days of sanctified souls can be remarkably luminous and transparent. Nor is it unusual that the imminence of death should bring with it special graces, such as visions, in foretaste of what is to come. The mellowing of spirituality, which is the highest aspect of old age in itself, is thus crowned with an illumination which belongs more to youth than to age; and it is to this synthesis, or more precisely to its macrocosmic counterpart, that the title of our chapter refers; for analogously, in the macrocosm, the nearness of the new Golden Age cannot fail to make itself mysteriously felt before the end of the old cycle; and, as we shall see later, such an anticipation has been predicted in various parts of the globe. We have here, in this junction of ending with beginning, yet another reason, perhaps the most powerful of all, why 'the last shall be first'.⁵

The decrepitude of the macrocosm in its old age is the

⁵ See p. 13.

theme of the two preceding chapters of this book; and to those ailments already mentioned we may add the many pseudo-esoterisms and heresies with which the modern world is rife, and which make it easier to go astray than ever before. Despite these, thanks to what is most positive in this day of conflicting opposites, the highest and deepest truths have become correspondingly more accessible, as if forced to unveil themselves by cyclic necessity, the macrocosm's need to fulfil its aspect of terminal wisdom. This same need—for to speak of wisdom is to speak of esoterism—was bound to cause an inward movement away from error and towards these truths. That it has in fact done so is shown, apart from more direct but less accessible signs, by the greatly increased publication of relevant books, for a minority no doubt but none the less on a scale to which esoterism has long been unaccustomed. The complex nature of the spirit of the times can explain facts which could otherwise be difficult to account for. In this meeting of estuary and source, finality derives from primordiality a certain aspect of abruptness, an initiative which is not typical of old age itself. Needless to say, the movement in question could not be lacking in the necessary traditional continuity; but neither could it be a smooth transition, an ordinary sequel from something that has gone before; and this explains also the widespread lack of preparation for it. Amongst those who in themselves are truly qualified for an esoteric path, it is inevitable that not a few should stand in need of a certain initial enlightenment by reason of their upbringing and education in the modern world.

This applies in yet greater measure to others, less qualified and more numerous, who in an earlier age would probably have remained in exoterism and who appear to owe their eventual qualification for esoterism partly to the fact of

their birth in the present age. The following quotation will help to explain this paradox: 'Exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions; there comes a moment in history when all kinds of experiences oblige it to modify its claims to exclusiveness, and it is then driven to a choice: escape from these limitations by the upward path, in esoterism, or by the downward path, in a worldly and suicidal liberalism. As one might have expected, the civilizationist exoterism of the West has chosen the downward path, while combining this incidentally with a few esoteric notions which in such conditions remain inoperative.'⁶

This lower choice, officially ratified by Vatican II for the Catholic Church and already characteristic of the other Churches of Western Europe, does not prevent individuals from choosing the upward path, that of esoterism. Some of those who would not have been qualified in the past are now given access to it in virtue of a truly positive attitude, severely put to the test by the present spiritual crisis, and amply verified by the choice of the higher rather than the lower. On the one hand, the foundering of certain exoteric vessels is bound in the nature of things to enlarge the responsibilities of esoterism, which cannot refuse to take on board those in the sea about it who ask for a lifeline to be thrown to them and who have no means of salvation else. On the other hand, obtusenesses which in the past would

⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, pp. 19-20. By way of example, the acceptance of religions other than one's own is esoterically operative if it be based on intellectual discernment between the true and the false, that is, if it be recognition of orthodoxy to the exclusion of everything else. But acceptance of other religions on the basis of the widely predominant sentimental pseudo-charity of our day is not merely inoperative in any positive sense but it is exceedingly harmful, for where discernment is not the guiding factor the door to error is inevitably opened, and the true religions are dishonoured by being placed on a level with heretical sects.

have proved to be disqualifications can be modified or even partially dissolved by the virtues inherent in 'old age'. Whatever the circumstances may be, a suppliant hand held out from the modern chaos in the direction of right guidance is an indication that its owner cannot be relegated to the spiritually passive majority.

In connection with the widespread need for initial enlightenment, it must be remembered that esoterism presupposes the sense of the Absolute. More precisely, since there is no soul which is not virtually imbued with this sense, esoterism presupposes that it be actual and operative, at least to a certain degree. On that basis it can be further actualized by indirect contact with the Absolute, that is, with Its 'overflows', if one may use such a term, into the various domains of this world. One such 'overflow' is the esoteric doctrine itself, and this is indispensable; but its effect upon the soul may be reinforced by other earthly manifestations of the Absolute. The argument of beauty, for example, may be a powerful ally to the arguments of truth.

In the theocratic civilizations, the spiritual authority and the temporal power saw to it that the beauty of nature was not unduly desecrated by man, and that parallel to nature there were objects of sacred art that conformed to a style which had come as a gift from Heaven, and which was never a merely human invention. In the rigorous sense of the term, which is all we are considering here, sacred art is as a crystallization of sanctity, a spiritual presence which has power to purify and to enlighten and which, unlike ascetic practices of a similar power, makes no demands of man which run counter to his natural bent.

'It'⁷ sets up, against the sermon which insists on what

⁷ Sacred art, and in particular the architecture of mediaeval Christendom.

must be done by one who would become holy, a vision of the cosmos which is holy through its beauty; it makes men participate naturally and almost involuntarily in the world of holiness.⁸

Today, despite the desecrations, nature still remains an inexhaustible treasury of reminders to man of his true heritage, reminders which may become operative in the light of the doctrine; and parallel to virgin nature, even if the Christian civilization may have gone without possibility of recall, many of its landmarks still remain. Some of these, the cathedrals for example, are monuments of overwhelming beauty which bear witness to the spiritual exaltation of the age which produced them. In addition to their power as sacred art, they are eloquent exponents—and never more so than when seen from today's abyss—of spirituality's universal rule; 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven and all the rest shall be given unto you', and its parallel 'Unto him that hath shall be given'. At the same time, their presence is yet another demonstration of the truth that 'from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath'. As material objects, they proclaim the spiritual man's mastery over matter, whereas the inability of the modern world to produce anything like them betrays the materialist's impotence precisely where he might have been expected to excel. He it is 'that hath not', having rejected the Transcendent; and 'that which he hath', namely matter, is taken away from him in the sense that he cannot really be said to possess it, having no qualitative dominion over it. We have only to approach a town like New York to have an alarming impression that matter has taken possession of man and quantitatively overwhelmed him. But standing in front of

⁸ Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, p. 46. The message of this book is centrally typical of the wisdom of the age both in virtue of its universality and of its finality.

Durham, Lincoln or Chartres Cathedral we see that our mediaeval ancestors were able to dominate matter to the point of compelling it to excel itself and to become vibrant with the Spirit.

What has been said about Christian art applies also to the arts of other sacred civilizations; and for the great loss of the experience of a traditional way of life, there can now be, for those capable of taking it, a certain compensation in the gain of access to the spiritual riches of traditions other than one's own. Religions in their outermost aspects have often been represented as different points on the circumference of a circle, the centre of which is the Divine Truth. Every such point is connected to the centre by a radius which stands for the esoterism of the religion in question. The more a radius approaches the centre, the nearer it is to the other radii, which illustrates the fact that the esoteric paths are increasingly close to each other, however far the respective exoterisms may seem to be. Now sacred art, although it does not withhold its blessings from any sector of the community, is in itself a purely esoteric phenomenon, which means that it is central and therefore universal. Needless to say, there are degrees to be observed in this respect; but all that is best in sacred art virtually belongs to everyone who has 'eyes to see' or 'ears to hear', no matter what his faith or his race; and this virtuality can be actualized today as never before.

The nearer a work is to the centre the more universal it is, but also, at the same time, the more concentratedly it represents the world of its own particular provenance. What could be more universal than the Bharata Natyam temple dancing of India and the music that accompanies it, the landscape paintings of China and Japan, the Romanesque and Gothic Cathedrals of Western Europe, and the Mosques of Andalusia, Egypt, Persia and Turkestan, to mention only

a few examples? And what, respectively, could give us a more concentrated sense of the unique spiritual fragrance of each of the four ways in question, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam? To add a fifth, exactly the same may be said of the statuary of Buddhism, from Ajanta to Kyoto. Taken together, the summits of sacred art give us in little, that is, in an easily assimilated form, a faithful view of the immense variety of the great religions and their civilizations, a pageant which can be for some as a semi-transparent veil that both hides and reveals the Transcendent Source of these wonders.⁹ This comprehensive view may be considered as an aspect of that wisdom which is the theme of our chapter; for although it is a potential feature of every sage, no matter when he lives, it withheld itself as an actuality from all other epochs, and offers itself now to him who seeks.¹⁰

What has been said about the crystallization of holiness in art may be said to hold good for incarnations of holiness, the sainthoods which exemplify the primordial nature that is hidden in fallen man by second nature. Some men can be initially penetrated and won more easily by a personal perfection, a human summit, than by any other mode of excellence; and there can now be added, to the Saints of one religion's calendar, their glorious counterparts from every other religion. We are speaking here of an initial penetration, and of indirect contacts with holy men such as can be made through the reading of hagiographies. It goes without saying that at a later stage the living personal perfection of

⁹ In the Islamic litany of the 99 Names of God, one of the names which this context recalls is *al-Badī*, the Marvellously Original.

¹⁰ The quantities of lavishly illustrated books now available, and their equivalents for the auditive arts, are yet another sign of the times inasmuch as they spring from what might be called the archival aspect of finality, a question we will return to later.

the Spiritual Master¹¹ will necessarily take precedence, while at the same time it will make these other examples of sainthood more accessible.

As to the doctrine, it is indispensable both in itself and to throw its light on other motivations. It is also needed today as a protection: if esoteric truths continued to be kept secret as in the past on account of their danger, this would not prevent the spread of pseudo-esoterism—a poison to which the best antidote is true esoterism—whose dangers are thus outweighed by its powers to safeguard against its own counterfeits; and beyond these it is needed for the refutation of more general errors. 'We live in an age of confusion and thirst in which the advantages of communication are greater than those of secrecy; moreover only esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world . . . Only esoterism . . . can provide answers that are neither fragmentary nor compromised in advance by a denominational bias. Just as rationalism can remove faith, so esoterism can restore it.'¹²

In order to follow an esoteric path it is not necessary to make a quantitative study of the doctrine; it is enough to know the essentials, which are centred on the nature of God and the nature of man. The symbolism of the elementary numbers is always enlightening, and in this case it is the number three which holds, as it were, the keys to understanding the relationship between the Creator and His human image. The presence of certain triads in the world, such as that of the primary colours, is the proof of a triplicity in the Divine Nature Itself, the Supreme Archetype

¹¹ It is a universal axiom that anyone who is truly qualified to follow an esoteric path will find, if he 'seeks' and, if he 'knocks', the master he needs. For more ample considerations on this subject, see Appendix B.

¹² Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, pp. 7-8.

of all that exists. In *From the Divine to the Human*, Schuon dwells at some length on this triplicity which is nothing other than the Absolute Infinite Perfection of God Himself, these three supreme transcendences being the intrinsic dimensions of Divine Reality. Perfection is, as he remarks, 'the Sovereign Good'; and having reminded us of St Augustine's saying that 'the good tends essentially to communicate itself', he adds: 'As Sovereign Good, the Absolute-Infinite cannot not project the world.'¹³ But he goes on to remind us that It remains in Itself totally unaffected by this projection: 'Being what it is, the Absolute cannot not be immutable, and It cannot not radiate. Immutability, or fidelity to itself; and Radiation, or gift of Itself; there lies the essence of all that is.'¹⁴

The Absolute Infinite Perfection is One. It transcends all multiplicity while being its root, and it is only at a lower level that we can begin to differentiate between the three terms of the triad. This is the level of what Schuon has called 'the relative Absolute'—a term which is applicable to the Christian Trinity and to Hinduism's analogous ternary Being-Consciousness-Beatitude.¹⁵ At the same level, in Jewish and Islamic doctrine, are the non-essential Divine names such as Creator, which already implies the duality Creator-creature. Without being as yet manifested, the 'Hidden Treasure' is on the way to manifesting Itself.

If the Good is that which is to be manifested or communicated, the means of radiation is derived from the Infinite. These two intrinsic aspects of Reality are reflected by the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity, and, for Hinduism, by the corresponding Consciousness and Beatitude. 'It

¹³ This same truth is expressed in Islam as the already quoted tradition: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, and so I created the world.'

¹⁴ P. 42.

¹⁵ *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*.

could be asked what relationship there is between the Good and Consciousness (*Chit*); now the Good, from the moment that It springs as such from the Absolute—which contains It in an undifferentiated or indeterminate manner—coincides with the distinctive Consciousness which the Absolute has of Itself; the Divine Word, which is the “Knowledge” that God has of Himself, cannot but be the Good, God being able to know Himself as Good only.¹⁶

The Divine triplicity is reflected throughout the Universe in innumerable ways,¹⁷ being especially intense in man himself. ‘Man, “made in the image of God”, has an intelligence capable of discernment and contemplation; a will capable of freedom and strength; a soul, or a character, capable of love and virtue.’¹⁸ In the light of the quotation which precedes this, it is clear that intelligence corresponds to Perfection, the Sovereign Good. The same applies to doctrine, the content of the intelligence; all theology derives from the Divine Perfection by way of the Divine Word. Will and soul are rooted in the Absolute and the Infinite respectively. The psychic substance is the ‘space’ in which man deploys his faculties, and the primordial soul is no less than a vast presence. As to the primordial will—the will that is ‘for God’ in the most powerful sense these words have—it is irresistibly overwhelming:¹⁹ no obstacle can stand in its way.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 39.

¹⁷ Since the primary colours have been mentioned, we may say, in passing, that it is the right of the Absolute that we should know which is its colour before we have time to think. As to the Infinite, its right is, with regard to the same question, that our thoughts should unfold in the direction of its two great earthly symbols, the sky and the ocean. Nor is it difficult to see that Perfection, the Sovereign Good, is the Supreme Archetype of gold.

¹⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Even when perverted, the will retains something of the imprint of the Absolute, whence the terrible dangers inherent in ambition.

'Man may know, will and love; and to will is to act. We know God by distinguishing Him from whatever is not He and by recognizing Him in whatever bears witness to Him; we will God by accomplishing whatever leads us to Him and by abstaining from whatever removes us from Him; and we love God by Loving to know and to will Him, and by loving whatever bears witness to Him, around us as well as within us.'²⁰

Man's three faculties, intelligence, will and soul, thus correspond to the equally interdependent ternary of doctrine, method, morals, or faith, practice, virtue, or 'comprehension concentration,'²¹ conformation'. It follows from the above quotations that to be effective the doctrine's initial appeal to the intelligence must include within its scope also the will and the soul. There can be no spirituality—or in other words no microcosm worthy of the name—without wholeness, that is, without sincerity, which means the harmonious cooperation of all these three faculties towards the common end. Nor indeed can there be any advance upon the esoteric way if the truth that is addressed to the mind does not lead to practice, and if both are not supported by virtue.

'Obviously the most brilliant intellectual knowledge is fruitless in the absence of the realising initiative that corresponds to it and in the absence of the necessary virtue; in other words, knowledge is nothing if it is combined with spiritual laziness and with pretensions, egoism, hypocrisy. Likewise the most prestigious power of concentration is

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 95–6.

²¹ The quintessence of esoteric practice is concentration on the Real. One of the most direct methodic supports for this is the invocation of the Divine Name, an orison said by Hinduism to be, for the whole of the Dark Age, the greatest means of Deliverance (*moksha*) and thus of Union (*yoga*) with the Divine Self, the One Real 'I' of which all subjectivities are reflections.

nothing if it is accompanied by doctrinal ignorance and moral insufficiency; likewise again, natural virtue is but little without the doctrinal truth and the spiritual practice which operate it with a view to God and which thus restore to it the whole point of its being.²²

The movement towards the inward, which we are considering here may be said to represent the highest aspect of the extreme old age of the macrocosm. As such, in virtue of all that the times stand for in a positive sense, the esoterism in question could not be other than what the Hindus call *jñāna-marga*, the way of knowledge or, more precisely, of gnosis. It was fated to be so, for such a way presupposes a perspective of truth rather than love,²³ and it is objective regard for truth which characterizes the wisdom of old age.²⁴ It is beyond doubt significant in this respect that the last religion of the cycle, Islam—and therefore Sufism its esoteric dimension—should be dominated by the perspective of truth.

The mention of *jñāna* does not necessarily mean, in this context, a movement towards Hinduism. For each seeker the way in question could be, in principle, any one of the orthodox esoteric paths which are now operative. But before a way can be followed there must be an aspiration, and the word 'movement' is used here to mean the initial setting in motion of individuals in search of spiritual guidance and not the way itself, though this is bound to follow if the aspiration be a true one.

The seeming paradoxes and contradictions of our day are

²² *Ibid*, p. 169.

²³ Needless to say, it is not a question of mutually exclusive alternatives but of emphasis. Both elements must be present in every spiritual path.

²⁴ Even the many pseudo-esoterisms with which this half of our century is rife purport to be ways of knowledge, no doubt in the awareness that otherwise they would be without attraction for contemporary seekers.

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perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the literature of this most literate of all ages. On the one hand, like an old man who has become irrepressibly garrulous in his senility, the human race produces a ceaseless flow of books, and we may be certain that incomparably more is written than what reaches the stage of print. No period of history can come near to competing with this output either in terms of quantity or in terms of profanity and pointlessness—lack of the sense of reality, one might say. Most of these writings are in fact without pretension, for they claim to be no more than a means of lightly passing the day, and they have little hope of not being quickly superseded by others of their kind. They share with the mass media the blame of distracting man from the essential,²⁵ but they are far less dangerous than the writings of those literary, philosophic and scientific 'heroes' of the hour which serve to indoctrinate their readers with error in various forms and in general to imprison them within the limitations of the modern outlook.

At the same time, there are those many publications which reflect the already referred to archival aspect of finality. A general sense of the need to place everything on record—a sense that seems to be more collective than individual—has brought forth not only a spate of encyclopaedias but also a wealth of translations. The labour involved in making these records is for the most part no more than a passive participation in the wisdom of the age. The motives are largely academic; but some of the classics²⁶

²⁵ There is also the blame of modern man's lack of sense of royal responsibility for his vegetable kingdom. It has been calculated that about 15,000 fine forest trees are cut down to make enough paper to publish one issue only of one of the leading New York daily newspapers, almost all of which is thrown away the next day as rubbish.

²⁶ One of the first examples that comes to mind is *Honen, the Buddhist Saint* by Shunjō.

in question are of great spiritual value, and their present availability is a providential setting for those twentieth century works which may be considered as actively and centrally representative of our day in its best aspect,²⁷ and which no other age could have produced.

Amongst these signs of the times we will mention first of all *Man and his Becoming according to the Vēdānta*²⁸ by René Guénon. As the title suggests, this book is a definition, in Hindu terms, of the whole nature of man and of the supreme spiritual possibilities which lie open to him. Although the author himself had already found a spiritual path in the esoterism of Islam, that is, in Sufism, he preferred, with characteristically impersonal reckoning, to take as the basis for his exposition something still further removed from Christianity than just another monotheism. This does not however prevent him from continually referring to the three Abrahamic traditions. It is significant, in view of what was cyclically needed, that the Advaita Vēdānta has the advantage, shown by its altogether direct manner of expression, of never having had to speak in veiled terms in order to avoid a conflict with the limitations of exoterism. Moreover, as we have already seen, Hinduism possesses, like other religions of antiquity, the full doctrine of the *samsara*: it does not simplify the multiple reality of the great round of innumerable states of individual existence by narrowing it down to this one state of earthly life.

²⁷ It is indeed ironical that the true nature of our times should so completely elude the comprehension of the most ardent champions of the twentieth century, including all those would-be artists, a majority alas, who are exclusively bent on producing works that reflect the age we live in. Instead of seeing a husk of decrepitude which envelops a luminous kernel of wisdom—and it is the kernel that any true art of our day would reflect—they see only the husk, which they refuse to recognize as such. There is no need to dwell on the result.

²⁸ *L'Homme et son devenir selon la Vēdānta*, first published in 1925.

Another advantage of Hinduism as a basis for the exposition of universal truth is the comprehensive breadth of its structure. On the one hand, like Judaism and Islam, it depends on direct revelation and makes a rigorous distinction between what is revealed and what is merely inspired. On the other hand, like Christianity, it depends on the *Avatara*, that is, the descent of the Divinity into this world; and for the maintenance of the tradition there is a succession of no less than ten Avatars. As far as historic times are concerned, the seventh and eighth of these, Rama and Krishna, are the most important for Hinduism itself. The ninth, specifically non-Hindu (literally 'foreign'), is generally considered to be the Buddha; and the tenth, Kalki, 'the rider on the white horse', will have the universal function of closing this cycle of time and inaugurating the next, which identifies his descent with the second advent of Christ.

Hinduism's breadth of structure is matched by its unequalled length of span across the centuries as a fully valid way of worship, by reason of its providential escape from the degeneracy which other religions of its own age suffered in the normal course. This brings us to the Aryan affinity which it has with the Western world as a whole. The fact that European languages are Indo-Germanic and therefore cognate with Sanskrit means, at a deeper level, that the religions of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Germans and Celts must have been originally so many counterparts or parallels of Hinduism. To make this most ancient religion the basis of a doctrinal exposition is thus to offer the Western world, for those few who are capable of taking it, a mysterious and purely positive renaissance of a relatively primordial heritage which has long been out of reach.

This question of affinity must not however be exaggerated. It means that there may be something in the European soul

which is naturally open to the voice of Hinduism and predisposed to listen to its altogether objective approach to the doctrine. But it cannot be considered in a more operative sense, nor had Guénon any intention along those lines.²⁹ The great purpose behind *Man and his Becoming* and all his other writings is to open his readers to the possibility of following an esoteric path, a possibility which, in the case of vocation becomes a necessity; but he does not recommend any one traditional line more than another. His motto was expressly *Vincit omnia veritas* 'Truth conquers all'; it was also, in fact, 'Seek and ye shall find' and 'Knock and it shall be opened unto you'. Implicit in his writings is the certainty of their author that they will providentially come to the notice of those qualified to receive his message, which will prove irresistible to them in the sense that they will be compelled to seek, and thus to find, a spiritual path. His books and articles are therefore, in intention and in fact, a treasury of information about what an intellectual—or one who is virtually so—needs to be made aware of; and a feature of Guénon's greatness is his remarkable grasp of the twentieth century situation and his consequent ability to put his finger on the crucial gaps in modern man's understanding.

One of these gaps is the already mentioned failure to make a rigorous distinction between Intellect and reason, a distinction which he frequently emphasizes. Moreover to read the main part of his writing is to study metaphysics, which is concerned with the whole hierarchy of those states of being which transcend the human state, including those which transcend creation itself. One of his definitions

²⁹ In letters to those who asked his advice—for he kept up a wide correspondence—he tended to be discouraging with regard to Hinduism as a possible spiritual path for the Western seeker.

of the qualification to follow an esoteric path is 'having the presentiment of one's higher states', which clearly takes us beyond the rational or mental domain.

Guénon is also an unsurpassed master of the science of symbolism, and a whole section of his work is devoted to that theme. The consciousness that the fabric of this world is woven out of symbols is not something that modern man acquires in the course of his education; and another closely related gap in his understanding has to do with the performance of sacred rites which are symbols enacted. The relationship between rite and symbol, at the best only partially understood, needed to be explained in greater depth. The following passages, from an article entitled *The Language of the Birds*, are representative of Guénon in more ways than one.

'There is often mention, in different traditions, of a mysterious language called "the language of the birds". The expression is clearly a symbolic one since the very importance which is attached to the knowledge of the language—it is considered to be the prerogative of a high initiation—precludes a literal interpretation. The Koran for example says (xxvii, 15): "And Solomon was David's heir and he said: O men we have been taught the language of the birds, and all favours have been showered upon us." Elsewhere we read of heroes, like Siegfried in the Nordic legend, who understand the language of the birds as soon as they have overcome the dragon, and the symbolism in question may easily be understood from this. Victory over the dragon has, as its immediate consequence, the conquest of immortality which is represented by some object, the approach to which is barred by the dragon, and the conquest of immortality implies, essentially, reintegration at the centre of the human state, that is, at the point where communication is established with the higher states of the

being. It is this communication which is represented by the understanding of the language of the birds and, in fact, birds are often taken to symbolise the angels and thus, precisely, the higher states. That is the significance, in the Gospel parable of the grain of mustard seed, of "the birds of the air" which came to lodge in the branches of the tree—the tree which represents the axis that passes through the centre of each state of being and connects all the states with each other. In the mediaeval symbol of the Peridexion (a corruption of *Paradision*) one sees birds on the branches of a tree and a dragon at its foot.³⁰

In the same article Guénon says, in speaking of the rhythmic formulae which are termed *dhikr*³¹ in Sufism and *mantra* in Hinduism: 'The repetition of these formulae is intended to bring about the harmonization of the different elements of the being and to cause vibrations which, by their repercussions throughout the whole hierarchy of the states, are capable of opening up a communication with the higher states. This is moreover, generally speaking, the essential and primordial purpose of all rites.'³² Elsewhere he says: 'Rite and symbol are basically two aspects of the same reality, namely the correspondence³³ which connects with each other all the degrees of universal existence. Through this correspondence, our human state can be put in communication with the higher states of the being.'³⁴

One of the points which is especially stressed by Guénon is the need for the rite of initiation, without which there

³⁰ *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter 1969, p. 94.

³¹ Literally 'remembrance', which must be understood in the light of what has already been said about 'Platonic remembrance' with regard to the power of the symbol to recall its archetype.

³² *Ibid.* p. 95.

³³ He means the symbol-archetype correspondence.

³⁴ *Aperçus sur l'initiation*, p. 122.

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can be no question of an esoteric path. What is generally known in the West as 'the chain of apostolic succession' is merely one example, in a relatively outward domain, of something which all esoterisms have in common. The initiatic rite serves to attach fallen man, through the chain which goes back to the founder of the religion himself, to a new ancestral line. Without this true and effective renewal of primordial heredity, there could be no hope of regaining one's first nature, except by a miracle which no one has the right to expect, least of all one who had had the presumption to refuse to follow the normal course.

In addition to his writings on esoterism, Guénon also wrote books which are mainly concerned with the errors of the modern world,³⁵ though here also esoterism is always present in the background as 'the one thing necessary', the indispensable corner-stone for any restoration of the world to normality. A note which is sounded in all his writings is the need for orthodoxy, a term which has become, in academic use, almost a synonym for narrow and fanatical exoterism, but which Guénon re-establishes in its true sense, while extending its guarantee of rightness beyond the limits of one religion only. In his perspective it takes on a vast significance, to include, for all seekers of religious truth, every form of worship that has its origin in Divine intervention and has been faithfully transmitted from generation to generation by an uninterrupted process of tradition.

With Guénon mention must also be made of Ananda Coomaraswamy.³⁶ In most respects they cover the same ground, for the writings of both are centred on metaphysical

³⁵ *The Crisis of the Modern World*, for example and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*.

³⁶ Coomaraswamy's *The Bugbear of Literacy* is an example which may be added to the two books of Guénon mentioned in the previous note. Ananda is

principles and both, from this same standpoint, wrote pertinent and devastating criticisms of the modern world. In particular Coomaraswamy was also, like Guénon, a master of symbolism; but there is a whole aesthetic dimension in Coomaraswamy that is lacking in Guénon, who was not an authority on art. Needless to say, it is their similarities rather than their differences which bring them into the present context; but within the general framework of terminal wisdom, it cannot be denied that there is a certain complementary relationship between the two.³⁷

A typical example of Coomaraswamy's writing is his article 'Symplegades', so entitled because its starting point is 'The Clashing Rocks' of Greek mythology. These rocks have, as he shows, many different parallels in other traditions, in particular the various forms of 'The Active Door', that is, the gateway through which it is difficult and dangerous to pass because the two leaves of the portal, in some cases represented as 'razor-edged', are liable to snap suddenly together. This side of the 'narrow gate' is the domain of earthly nature and of man; beyond it lies the Transcendent. Sometimes the passage is made in order to bring a celestial object to earth as when, for the quest of the Golden Fleece, Jason's boat *Argo* is driven by Athene, Goddess of Wisdom, between the Clashing Rocks which she holds apart. More often however it is a question of the

not to be confused with his son Rama, whose recent book *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* has been quoted in an earlier chapter.

³⁷ This is well brought out in the A. K. Coomaraswamy Centenary Issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Summer, 1977), in the article 'Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History' by Whitall Perry, whose monumental *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* may be mentioned here as another of those works which only this age could have produced. Its undertaking was inspired, so the author tells us, by Coomaraswamy's remark: 'The time is coming when a *Summa* of the *Philosophia Perennis* will have to be written, impartially based on all orthodox sources whatsoever.'

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spiritual path of no return, and of the passage from mortality to Immortality. But in any case, none can pass safely between the rocks or the door-leaves by merely human resource. Divine aid is needed—for example, a God-given incantation or invocation. In some Eskimo legends the souls of men are represented by birds, in particular geese migrating to the South at the onset of Winter, and it is only 'the fast fliers' (that is, as Coomaraswamy remarks, those who have duly received initiation, the mandate of Heaven) who escape being crushed to death by 'the clapping mountains' which are a form of 'the clashing rocks'. Another form is that of 'the clashing waters', if the Exodus be interpreted in its esoteric sense, 'the crossing of the Red Sea from the Egyptian darkness of this world to a Promised Land'. Yet another form, to be found in a Greenland myth, is that of 'two clashing icebergs'.

The Symplegades have also a temporal significance: 'An unmistakable reference to the Clashing Rocks is to be found in Rgveda, vi, 49.3, where the 'Rocks' are times, viz., Day and Night, described as "clashing together and parting"'. He quotes also from the *Kaṣṣṭaki Brāhmaṇa*: 'Night and Day are the Sea that carries all away, and the two Twilights are its fordable crossings; so he sacrifices [performs the sacrifice to Agni] at Twilight . . . Night and Day, again, are the encircling arms of Death; and just as a man about to grasp you with both arms can be escaped through the opening between them, so he sacrifices at Twilight . . . this is the sign of the Way-of-the-Gods, which he takes hold of, and safely reaches Heaven.'

Coomaraswamy gives far more examples than those few mentioned here; and while basing his exposition mainly on the sacred books of Hinduism, he quotes also copiously from an immense variety of other sources, Buddhist, American Indian, Jewish, Pythagorean, Hermetic, Platonic and

Neo-Platonic, Christian,³⁶ and Islamic, with additional references to world-wide 'folklore' survivals from more ancient traditions.

In conclusion he says: 'It remains only to consider the full doctrinal significance of the Symplegades. What the formula states literally is that whoever would transfer from this to the Otherworld, or return, must do so through the un-dimensioned and timeless "interval" that divides related but contrary forces, between which, if one is to pass at all, it must be "instantly" . . . It is, then precisely from these "pairs" that liberation must be won, from their conflict that we must escape, if we are to be freed from our mortality . . . Here, under the Sun, we are "overcome by the pairs" (*Maitri Upanishad* III, 1): here "every being in the emanated-world moves deluded by the mirage of the contrary-pairs, of which the origin is in our liking and disliking . . . but those who are freed from this delusion of the pairs . . . freed from the pairs that are implied by the expression 'weal and woe', these reach the place of invariability" (*Bhagavad Gītā* VII, 27-8 and xv, 5).' He adds, from St Nicholas of Cusa: 'The wall of the Paradise in which Thou, Lord dwellest, is built of contradictories, nor is there any way to enter but for one who has overcome the highest Spirit of Reason³⁹ who guards its gate (*De visione Dei*, chapter IX, to end)'.

These paragraphs will at least serve to give some inkling of the great interest of this article in itself, which 'proves'

³⁶ The Christian sources include Dionysus, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Eckhardt, Ruysbroeck, St Nicholas of Cusa, Boehme and Angelus Silesius, not to mention numerous references to the mediaeval romances of Chrétien de Troyes and others.

³⁹ The plane of reason is, precisely, the plane of opposites, and to overcome the one is to overcome the other. But this can only be achieved by the Intellect which is suprarational and, in its highest reaches, Divine, and which alone can conquer the dualism to which man became subject through eating the fruit of the forbidden tree.

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the existence of a universal consciousness, going back to incalculably early times, of the need to transcend our human state, and of the impossibility of doing so without the help of the Transcendent, the 'mandate of Heaven'. 'Symplegades' is moreover merely one example amongst many others which display the same qualities. Again and again Coomaraswamy goes out to meet the modern world's so-called intelligentsia on their own ground, that is, the ground of what they would call 'purely objective scholarship', which alone they respect. It is as if he had said: 'You ask for scholarship and nothing but that, so let us have it; but let it be the real thing, in fullness and in depth, not merely a surface smattering.' Having thus as it were thrown down the gauntlet, he takes some theme of basic importance for religion in general and proceeds to expound his thesis with a mastery which no modern authority of learning could fail to recognize—we might even say, at which no such authority could fail to feel dwarfed, for the writings of Coomaraswamy have evoked in many minds, both before and since his death in 1947, the question as to whether any other equally great scholar has ever existed. However that may be, his books and articles demonstrate amongst other things that beneath the superficial differences and apparent contradictions at which most modernist minds tend to stop short, there lies a complete traditional unanimity the world over for all that is of essential significance, a unanimity of far-reaching implications which cannot be disregarded.

If we were to sum up the work of Coomaraswamy as 'truth', that of Guénon could be summed up with the word 'orthodoxy'. In reading Guénon we are scarcely ever allowed to lose sight of the driving force behind his pen, the already mentioned purpose or hope of enabling and impelling a qualified minority to take effective spiritual action. This

purpose was no doubt also present in Coomaraswamy, but the reader is less aware of it. One's immediate impression is of a vast canvas of metaphysical and cosmological truth which stretches the intelligence towards its limits, enlarging it and enlightening it, and thus predisposing it for the spiritual work which is the methodic complement of doctrine—a complement which tends to be no more than implicit in Coomaraswamy, whereas in Guénon it is altogether explicit.

The mention of these two writers recalls the great commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy Heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength'.⁴⁰ It was part of their function to recall the forgotten truth, affirmed by traditions all over the world, that the Heart is the throne of the Intellect. As to the rest of the commandment, the tendency of Western religious authorities in recent centuries had been to sacrifice almost totally 'with all thy mind' for the supposed benefit of 'with all thy soul' and 'with all thy strength'. In consequence, piety had become more and more sentimental, and minds, set free for other things, had worked themselves up into an unparalleled state of unrest. The modern civilization is largely the result. But it has been the function of Guénon and Coomaraswamy to recall some minds from the profane to the sacred, and to awaken others which were half asleep for want of a true object. The writings of these two sages, which could not have been expected by any chain of worldly causality, are indeed so opportune as to be suggestive of something in the nature of a mission. This does not mean that we are claiming for either the status of prophethood, which both would have disclaimed. But it may none the less be relevant to remember, in connection with them,

⁴⁰ St Mark, xii, 30.

the promise contained in the closing words of the Old Testament: 'Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse'.⁴¹

In connection with this passage, in an article about the function of Elijah—or Elias, as he is called in the New Testament—Leo Schaya remarks that the relationship between 'fathers' and 'children' signifies the 'tradition', the religious teaching which is passed from the one to the other. He adds: 'The "heart of the fathers" is the central inward aspect, the essence of the tradition, its esoteric spiritual and universal nucleus; it is also the doctrines, methods and influences which are derived from it. The "heart of the children" or believers is their spiritual receptivity, their inward acceptance and reception of what is given them by their "fathers" . . . This acceptance or reception is expressed in Hebrew by the word *Qabbalah* which has become synonymous quite specifically with the esoteric tradition in which Elias is the invisible Master, he who descends secretly to this lower world, not only towards the end but each time, ever since his ascension, that the tradition has needed reviving from within.'⁴² Schaya also says: 'When he returns towards the end of time . . . Elias will raise his voice so loud, says Jewish tradition, that it will be heard from one end of the earth to the other. This means that Elias' mission is not confined to Israel, but will spread to all peoples and thereby to all religions'. The Gospel likewise reiterates the promise that Elias will come again

⁴¹ Malachi, iv, 5-6.

⁴² 'The Eliatic Function' in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter-Spring, 1979, p. 15.

before the end: 'Elias shall truly first come and restore all things'.⁴³ But Jesus adds that he has also already come in the person of John the Baptist; and Gabriel foretold to Zachariah that his son would proceed 'in the spirit and power of Elias'.⁴⁴ Schaya concludes: 'Elias therefore means not only a prophet sent to Israel but also a universal function which may be exercised by several persons both within Judaism and within other traditions.'

We will come back later to the question of Elias. Meantime he has been mentioned here because the works of Guénon and Coomaraswamy are precisely, in a very full sense, a turning of 'the heart of the fathers to the children' in order to operate a turning of the 'heart of the children to their fathers'. This, together with the almost prophetic suddenness of the Guénon-Coomaraswamy phenomenon, is a powerful indication that they were destined to inaugurate, for this cyclic moment, the workings of 'the Eliatic function'.

Their writing leads up to that of Frithjof Schuon. It could be said, again at the risk of simplification, that if Coomaraswamy represents truth in which commitment is implicit, and if Guénon represents both truth and commitment, it was left to Schuon to add his insistence on the need for total commitment, while at the same time, as regards doctrinal truth, his works are a self-sufficient whole. It could also be said that if the writings of Guénon lead to initiation, those of Schuon lead both to it and beyond it, for they contain a dimension of method which it was not the function of his two predecessors to give.

'Knowledge saves,' says Schuon, 'only on condition that it enlists all that we are: only when it is a way which tills and which transforms, and which wounds our nature as the plough wounds the earth . . .' Metaphysical knowledge

⁴³ St Matthew, xvii, 11.

⁴⁴ St Luke, i, 17.

is sacred. It is the right of sacred things to demand of man all that he is.⁴⁵

It was necessary that Guénon and Coomaraswamy should do concentrated justice to 'with all thy mind', and this they did, even to the point of partially neglecting 'with all thy soul'. Some enthusiasts of Guénon have wrongly concluded from his works that the whole esoteric path depends on the assimilation of doctrine and the correct performance of orthodox rites, and on nothing else, as if the virtues were not also essential. Guénon himself, if asked, would certainly have affirmed their necessity. His avoidance of the moral issue may have been deliberate, in view of a generation in full reaction against unintelligent moralism. However this may be, the reaction none the less called for an answer; and Schuon gives it by speaking of the moral dimension in a new, unmoralistic and more intellectually convincing way, with a stress on the importance of outward beauty, whether it be of nature or of art, as a prolongation of the inward beauty of virtue. In general the absence of the element 'with all thy soul' in Guénon and Coomaraswamy may not be unconnected with the extreme objectivity of their writings which was carried to the point of excluding any intrusion of their own individualities into what they wrote. Schuon is no less objective, where objectivity is required, than they are; but in reading him, one is conscious of a subject that is adequate to the cyclic significance of the writing itself. Nor can it be doubted that the living inwardness which penetrates his works does much to bestow on them their remarkable, integrating power—the power to draw both the mind and the soul in the direction of the Heart.

To the many quotations already made from Schuon

⁴⁵ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, (from a new translation by Peter Townsend, in press).

throughout this book we will simply add here a paragraph which is particularly relevant to our immediate context: 'The virtues, which by their very nature bear witness to the Truth also possess an interiorising quality according to the measure in which they are fundamental; the same is true of beings and things that transmit the messages of eternal Beauty; whence the power of interiorisation that belongs to virgin nature, to the harmony of creatures, to sacred art, to music . . . If we wish to withdraw into the Heart in order to find there the total Truth and the underlying pre-personal Holiness, we must manifest the Heart not only in our intelligence but also in our soul in general, by means of spiritual attitudes and moral qualities; for every beauty of the soul is a ray coming from the Heart and leading back to it.'⁴⁶

As is clear from its title, the recent work from which these words are taken has a very direct bearing on the theme of this chapter. We have added, as an appendix,⁴⁷ some reflections on his equally relevant *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*. But his other writings⁴⁸ are no less fully representative of the spirit of the times. On the one hand we are conscious of all those positive qualities which belong to the end of an age, in particular of a supreme mastery of summing up and of putting everything in its right place. Again and again, about this or about that, one has the impression that Schuon has said the last word. On the other hand we are conscious of the meeting of extremes and of a light that is primordial as well as terminal.

⁴⁶ *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 234.

⁴⁷ Appendix A.

⁴⁸ All those available in English are listed under his name in the bibliography.

6

The Restorer

IT IS NOT given to man to foresee the future with any clarity—otherwise prophecies would be neither veiled nor ambiguous. But man has the right to speculate about the future in humble awareness of his limitations in that respect—otherwise prophecies would not be forthcoming at all. Moreover in some cases a settled conviction is legitimate and even, we may say, willed by Heaven, in virtue of the weight and universality of the predictions; and so it is with regard to an imminent world-wide devastation, not total, but none the less of cataclysmic proportions, and not final, because it is to be 'before the end', though there are grounds for conviction that 'the end' itself cannot be far off.

The predictions leave no doubt as to the cause of such a Divine intervention; and enough has already been said to show that a large section of humanity has now reached an extreme of error beyond which it would be difficult to go. But the error could never have become universal, for the macrocosm, taken as a whole, is a sacred thing. Like all that is relative, it has to confess its relativity in the face of the Absolute, which it does by suffering a Dark Age, that is, by growing old. But it is not conceivable that it could ever be deserted by Heaven. Like the true microcosm, the macrocosm is a norm, and as such it has its rights: amongst these is the right to be protected against the errors of man; and

the human race, which in itself may be considered as macrocosm, has the right to be protected against those of mankind who have rejected their humanity by refusing to conform to the human function.

Of all communities now living, it is probably the American Indians who are, thanks to their traditional way of life, the most sensitive to the sanctity of the macrocosm. By them, in consequence, the vast destruction which they believe to be at hand is seen in a purely positive light, as a normalizing act of Heaven that will obliterate all the erections with which man has disfigured and desecrated the holy face of earth—whence the term Purification Day which for them designates this long awaited event. In Islam also the event is predicted in terms which the Indians would find reassuring. Nor need this surprise us, despite the many differences between the two perspectives in question, for Islam has always remained deeply conscious of its nomadic origins. It has moreover a double right to its claim of primordiality, one in retrospect, as a return to the pre-Judaic religion of Abraham, and the other by anticipation in virtue of its place at the threshold of the new primordial age. The Koran states specifically that before the end every town shall be either totally destroyed or severely punished;¹ and it may be assumed that this will have been preceded by a frenzy of urbanism, for when asked about the signs that would herald the approach of the latter days, the Prophet made mention in particular of the excessive height of the buildings that men would build.²

The term Purification Day suggests a possibility of redress before the close of the cycle; and in the Gospel

¹ xvii, 58.

² See Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, pp. 330–1.

account of the period which precedes the end there is likewise an element which, amidst all the evils explicitly foretold, might seem to imply reason for hope. Christ spoke of calamity after calamity, leading down to 'great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world'. Then he added the already quoted words: 'And except those days should be shortened, there should be no flesh saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.'³ The verses which immediately follow are as negative as those which precede, and they are usually taken to refer to the Antichrist. But the shortening of the days for the sake of the elect suggests that after the destruction the elect may be able to achieve something, if only for a while;⁴ and in this more positive context we may refer back to the Old Testament promise that Elijah will come again before the end. Particularly relevant also is the wording of the promise of Jesus: 'Elias shall truly first come and restore all things'.

In Islam the restorer is mentioned in many sayings of the Prophet. Without being named, he is referred to as 'the rightly guided one', *al-Mahdī*; and it may be presumed, in view of the vast scope of his authority, that the coming of the Mahdi will mark the fulfilment of the Jewish and Christian Eliatic hopes.⁵ The Islamic traditions point to a

³ See p. 10.

⁴ In her third apparition to the children of Fatima, the Blessed Virgin said, in speaking of the destruction: 'Some nations will be annihilated. But in the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me, and she will be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world.' (*Fatima in Lucia's Own Words*, p. 162. See also John de Marchi, *Fatima from the Beginning*, p. 79.) Some have sensed a prediction of peace also in St Malachy's prophecy of the popes (see Chapter 1, footnote 2), in relation to the next pope, whose reign is therein designated 'the glory of the olive' (*gloria olivae*).

⁵ For a more detailed identification of the Mahdi with Elias, see Leo Schaya, *The Eliatic Function*, pp. 36-8.

world-wide function which, although situated in Islam, is of too universal a nature not to extend beyond its boundaries, at least by radiation if not by deliberate and mandated action. Nor can it be excluded that redresses which are now impossible the world over might become, under his aegis, once more possible outside Islam as well as within it, after a 'Purification Day' had removed the obstacles. It was with reference to the preliminary redress to be effected by the Mahdi in anticipation of the total Messianic redress that Guénon wrote the following passage: 'For that (total) redress the way will have to be prepared, even visibly, before the end of the present cycle; but this can only be done by him who unites in himself the forces of Heaven and Earth, of the East and the West, and who shall manifest in the domains both of knowledge and of action the two-fold power of priest and of king which has been preserved throughout the ages in the integrity of its one principle.'⁶

The hopeful expectation of the Mahdi has produced in Islam a number of false Mahdis throughout the centuries. Of the true Mahdi the Prophet said: 'He will be broad of forehead and aquiline of nose. He will fill the earth with right and with justice even as it hath been filled with wrong and oppression. Seven years will he reign.' But towards the end of his reign or after it, Islam expects also the Antichrist. The Prophet is said to have mentioned that many had already foretold the coming of this greatest of evils, but that he himself was the first to make known a clear bodily sign by which he might be recognized. He would be 'a man blind in his right eye, in which all light is extinguished, even as it were a grape'. As in Christianity, it is believed in

⁶ *Aperçus sur l'initiation*, p. 264. The chapter in question was first published as an article, 'Initiation sacerdotale et initiation royale', in *Le Voile d'Isis*, 1931, the French journal which later became *Etudes Traditionnelles*.

Islam that he will cause corruption, and that by his power to work marvels he will win many to his side. But he will none the less be resisted. The Prophet said: 'A body of my people will not cease to fight for the truth until the coming forth of the Antichrist'; and he meant this inclusively, as is shown by what he says of the resistance to the Antichrist; 'When they are pressing on to fight, even while they straighten their lines for the prayer when it is called, Jesus the son of Mary will descend and will lead them in prayer. And the enemy of God, when he seeth Jesus, will melt even as salt melteth in water. If he were let be, he would melt into perishing: but God will slay him at the hand of Jesus, who will show them his blood upon his lance.'

The explanation of the almost simultaneous presence of the Mahdi and the Antichrist will already be clear from the last chapter. The two opposite tendencies which, as we have seen, inevitably characterize the end of the cycle, reach their extreme of opposition in these two beings. It is the Mahdi who incarnates 'the spirit of the times'; but the macrocosm has to die, and the Antichrist is its final and fatal sickness. As to those who personify its terminal wisdom, above all the Mahdi and, with him, the elect, they may thereby also be considered as the providential receptacles for the light which shines into the end of this cycle from the outset of the next. It is thus that although the Antichrist is said to come after the Mahdi or towards the end of his reign, spreading corruption and partly undoing his work, the Mahdi is none the less he who will have the last word, inasmuch as his kingdom is the harbinger of the new age, wherein it will have its prolongation, after having displayed in itself its own perfection of maturity and fulfilment.

APPENDIX A

On *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* by Frithjof Schuon

The preface opens with an explanation of the title: the 'Veil' is the opaqueness which is given off by pious extravagances of expression. The first chapter, 'Ellipsis and Hyperbole in Arab Rhetoric', puts before us many examples of those kinds of incoherence which all too often obscure Sufism's quintessence. One of the most striking features of the earlier parts of this book is the profound and subtle analysis of the type of soul which tends to generate the veils, and of the complementary type which reacts against them. Schuon's understanding of racial differences has been displayed in his *Castes and Races*. But in this new book he concentrates on one race alone, dwelling on the differences between its two main branches.

Although it could be said that every esoterism in the full sense of the word is universal, there are none the less affinities to be considered. Sufism, as the last esoterism of this cycle of time, cannot fail to have a certain temporal affinity with men of today. But there is also a racial factor to be considered, for although Sufism has become widely operative amongst yellow and black race communities, it cannot be said to owe them any of its basic characteristics. Paradoxically this does not prevent it from being in fact more easily accessible to some sectors of these races than it is to the modern Westerner. But that has nothing to do with racial affinity; it is merely that the communities in question are less firmly rooted in the totally profane and therefore

anti-esoteric civilization which dominates the West. The fact remains that Sufism is an esoterism of the white race, if it be permissible to say such a thing; and herein lies one of the reasons why this book is of vital importance; for although the double claim of Sufism is bound, in the nature of things, to remain entirely virtual for the vast majority of Westerners now living, it is urgent that all outward and as it were accidental barriers between it and the West should be eliminated. Because of these 'veils', a man might say: 'Sufism is not for me', when it might be the very thing he needed most of all.

Europeans and their offshoots in other parts of the world have long been aware of two hereditary strains within them. Matthew Arnold, for example, was acutely conscious of two influences, complementary or conflicting, in English literature, and he termed them Hebraism and Hellenism. Schuon takes us more vastly and profoundly into this consciousness, and he needs for his purpose the wider terms of Semitism and Aryanism. The following passage makes us aware, from the start, of the complexity in question: 'Psychologically, there are "introverted" and contemplative Aryans, the Hindus, and "extroverted" and enterprising Aryans, the Europeans; East and West, with the obvious reservation that the characteristics of the one are also to be found in the other. In the case of the Semites, who on the whole are more contemplative than Europeans and less contemplative than Hindus, there are also two principal groups, Jews and Arabs: the soul of the former is richer¹ but more turned in on itself, while that of the latter is poorer² but more expansive, more gifted from the point

¹ For a glimpse of this 'richness', one has only to read the biblical account of the building of the Temple in the early chapters of Chronicles II.

² In this connection, to avoid giving an oversimplified impression of what

of view of radiance and universality.' The author adds, by way of a note: 'In this comparison we are thinking of orthodox Jews—those who have remained Orientals even in the West—and not of the totally Europeanized Jews, who combine certain Semitic characteristics with Western extroversion.'

Further light is thrown on the different types two paragraphs later: *Grosso modo*, the Aryans—except in cases of intellectual obscuration in which they have only retained their mythology and ritualism—are above all metaphysicians and therefore logicians, whereas the Semites—if they have not become idolators and magicians—are *a priori* mystics and moralists; each of the two mentalities or capacities repeating itself within the framework of the other, in conformity with the Taoist symbol of the *yin-yang*. Or again, the Aryans are objectivists, for good or for ill, while the Semites are subjectivists; deviated objectivism gives rise to rationalism and scientism, whereas abusive subjectivism engenders all the illogicalities and all the pious absurdities of which sentimental fideism—over zealous and conventional—is capable. Let us quote also a passage which shows as clearly as possible how far the scope of this book extends beyond the domain of the Hebraism–Hellenism contrast which we have, as it were, in our blood: 'The encounter of Hinduism and Islam on the

Schunon means, the following passages should also be quoted: 'No doubt the Arab soul has its richness—the contrary would be inconceivable—but it has a poor richness; or a poverty enriched by the scintillation of nomadic virtues, and enhanced by a so to speak desert-like acuteness of intelligence . . . If there is a poor richness, there is also, and not less paradoxically, a rich poverty, and it is this that predisposed the Arabs to Islam and, along with it, to a mysticism of holy poverty: the saint, in Islam, is the "one who is poor", the *faqīr*, and the spiritual virtue *par excellence*, which moreover coincides with sincerity (*sidq*), is "poverty", *faqr*.'

soil of India has something profoundly symbolic and providential about it, given that Hinduism is the most ancient integral tradition and that Islam on the contrary is the youngest religion; it is the junction of the primordial with the terminal. But there is here more than a symbol; this encounter means in fact that each of these traditions, which are nevertheless as different as possible, has something to learn from the other, not of course from the point of view of dogmas and practices, but from that of tendencies and attitudes; Islam offers its geometric simplicity, its clarity and also its compassion, while Hinduism brings its influence to bear by its profound serenity and by its multiform and inexhaustible universality.

It will no doubt have been understood from what has already been said that the veils which are this book's preliminary theme may be said to result from the Semitic origins of Sufism, while Western reactions against them spring from our Aryan heredity. The reactions are no doubt all the stronger in that many of these Western readers who turn their attention to Sufism do so because they hope to find in it something they have failed to find in Christianity. The consciousness of this failure means that they have largely thrown off the Hebraism that the Bible had superimposed upon their Aryan roots. Their standpoint will therefore tend to be that of un-Semiticized Aryans.

Several aspects of veiling are treated in the book, with a wealth of illustration. The author speaks of his 'twofold obligation to criticize and to justify'. Without minimizing faults he explains how the fault in question comes to exist and what positive qualities lie at its roots. Also to be considered are the differences of approach which call for no criticism provided that they are innocent of intolerance and of exaggeration, but which none the less need to be explained. The following paragraph touches on points of

the greatest practical importance and is instructive, in different ways, for both the Semite and the Aryan.

'A Westerner desirous of following an esoteric way would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions; but the Muslim of esoteric inclination—and the attitude of the Qabbalist is doubtless analogous—has definitely the opposite tendency: if one speaks to him of metaphysics, he will find it natural to reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will be for later. He does not seem to realise that in the eyes of the Westerner, as also of the Hindu, this is to deprive the pious practices of their very point—not in themselves of course, but with a view to knowledge—and to make the way almost unintelligible; and above all, the Semitic zealot does not see that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to explain its nature and purpose. We may add that the moralistic attitude is only blameworthy through its ignorance of the opposite point of view or through its exaggeration, for in fact the doctrine deserves on our part an element of reverential fear; even our own spirit does not belong to us, and we only have full access to it to the extent that we know this. If it is true that the doctrine explains the meaning of devotion, it is equally true that devotion has a certain right to usher in the doctrine, and that the doctrine deserves this.'

Another kind of veil, not unrelated to those already mentioned, results from simplification. By way of example, Schuon shows that in their disagreements with the philosophers the Sufis have not always had right on their side. Let us quote what he says about the philosophers' claim that the

world is eternal, and his re-formulation or correction of the Sufis' total and over simplified rejection of this: 'The world is both eternal and temporal: eternal as a series of creations or creative rhythm, and temporal by the fact that each link in this flux has a beginning and an end. It is Universal Manifestation in itself that is co-eternal with God because it is a necessary expression of His eternal Nature—the sun being unable to abstain from shining—but eternity cannot be reduced to a given contingent phase of this divine Manifestation. Manifestation is "co-eternal", that is: not eternal, as only the Essence is; and this is why it is periodically interrupted and totally re-absorbed into the Principle, so that it is both existent and inexistent, and does not enjoy a plenary and so to speak "continuous" reality like the Eternal itself.'

Let us also quote the following: 'In certain respect, the difference between philosophy, theology and gnosis is total; in another respect, it is relative. It is total when one understands by "philosophy" only rationalism; by "theology", only the explanation of religious teachings; and by "gnosis", only intuitive and intellective, and thus supra-rational, knowledge; but the difference is only relative when one understands by "philosophy" the fact of thinking, by "theology" the fact of speaking dogmatically of God and religious things, and by "gnosis" the fact of presenting pure metaphysics, for then the *genres* interpenetrate. It is impossible to deny that the most illustrious Sufis, while being "gnostics" by definition, were at the same time to some extent theologians and to some extent philosophers, or that the great theologians were to some extent philosophers and to some extent gnostics, the last word having to be understood in its proper and non-sectarian meaning.'

The ground has now been cleared for what is the climax of the book, a chapter entitled 'The Quintessential Esoterism

of Islam'. Although very concentrated, it is shorter than one might have expected, but this accords with the nature of the quintessence which is its theme. As the author remarks: 'To describe known or what one may call literary Sufism in all its *de facto* complexity and all its paradoxes would require a whole book, whereas to give an account of the necessary and therefore concise character of Sufism, a few pages can suffice.'

The contents of this chapter may surprise some readers owing to widespread fallacies about the true nature of esoterism. Other readers on the contrary will have been well prepared by the author's *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, in which he states categorically: 'The profoundest truths are already given in the fundamental and initial formulations of the religions. Esoterism, in fact, is not an unpredictable doctrine that can only be discovered, should the occasion arise, by means of detailed researches; what is mysterious in esoterism is its dimension of depth, its particular developments, and its practical consequences, but not its starting points, which coincide with the basic symbols of the religion in question.'

It is therefore not surprising that the chapter should open with a reference to the three basic divisions of Islam: 'The Islamic religion is divided into three parts: *Īmān*, Faith, which contains everything one must believe; *Islām*, the Law, which contains everything one must do; *Iḥsān*, operative virtue, which confers upon believing and doing the qualities that make them perfect or, in other words, that intensify and deepen both faith and works. *Iḥsān*, in short, is the sincerity of the intelligence and the will: it is our adherence to the Truth and our total conformity to the Law, which means that we must, on the one hand, know the Truth entirely, not in part only, and on the other hand conform to it with our deepest being and not only with a

partial and superficial will. Thus *Ihsān* opens out into esoterism—which is the science of the essential and the total—and is even identical with it; for to be sincere is to draw from the Truth the maximal consequences from the point of view of both the intelligence and the will; in other words, it is to think and will with the heart, and thus with our whole being, with all that we are.'

This passage gives the key to the understanding of the whole, for it shows that Sufism, far from being other than Islam, is in fact total or absolute Islam as opposed to the fragmentary or relative Islam of exoterism. We are thus prepared in advance to read: 'The two-fold Testimony is the first and most important of the five "Pillars of the Religion". The others only have meaning in reference to it, and they are the following: Canonical Prayer; the Fast of Ramadan; Almsgiving; Pilgrimage. The esoterism of these practices resides not only in their obvious initiatic symbolism, it resides also in the fact that our practices are esoteric to the extent that we ourselves are esoteric, firstly by our understanding of the Doctrine and then by our assimilation of the Method; these two elements being contained, precisely, in the two-fold Testimony.'

The first formula of this Testimony is *lā ilāha illā Llāh*, 'there is no god but God', which can be paraphrased 'there is no reality but the (One) Reality'. Schuon explains in some detail how the whole doctrine of the Absolute and its manifestations is implicitly contained in this. More explicit is the second formula, *Muḥammadun Rasūlu Llāh*, Muhammad is the Messenger of God. 'The word *Rasūl*, "Messenger", indicates a "descent" of God towards the world; it also implies an "ascent" of man towards God . . . In the human microcosm the descent is inspiration, and the ascent is aspiration; the descent is Divine Grace, while the ascent is human effort, the content of which is "the remem-

brance of God" (*dhikru Llāh*), whence the name *Dhikru Llāh* given to the Prophet.' As to the other four pillars of Islam: 'Prayer marks the submission³ of Manifestation to the Principle; the Fast is detachment with regard to desires, thus with regard to the ego; the Almsgiving is detachment with regard to things, thus with regard to the world; the Pilgrimage, finally, is the return to the Centre, to the Heart; to the Self. A sixth pillar is sometimes added, the Holy War: this is the fight against the profane soul by means of the spiritual weapon.'⁴

This chapter is centred on Absolute Oneness. It is fittingly followed by a complementary final chapter which is centred, implicitly, on Absolute Plenitude. Explicitly, it is on the three dimensions of Oneness which are expressed by the words Absolute Infinite Perfection, and which esoterism can never lose sight of. We first know these dimensions in their reflections on the plane of our earthly experience—or rather we recognize them as evident when Schuon points them out to us.

'God is manifested in the world, as we have said, by the miracle of existence, the gulf between the least grain of dust and nothingness being absolute; He manifests his Infinity *a priori* by the cosmic container space-time, which has no imaginable limits, any more than do the multiplicity and diversity of its contents; and He manifests His Perfection by the qualities of things and beings, which bear witness to their divine archetypes and thereby to the divine Perfection . . . On the one hand, space together with time, then the existence of things, and then their qualities, "prove"

³ The prayer culminates in the prostration which signifies, esoterically, the extinction (or reabsorption) of the relative in the Absolute, of the accident in the Substance.

⁴ The chief spiritual weapon is *dikhru Llāh*, the remembrance of God which means, methodically speaking, the invocation of the Name *Allāh*.

God; on the other hand, they "are" God, but seen through the veil of "Outwardness" or of "Distance".'

This chapter also confronts us with the same triad on higher planes and according to different spiritual Perspectives—Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian, as well as Islamic. 'Moreover, and even above all, Infinitude—like Perfection—is an intrinsic characteristic of the Absolute: it is as it were its inward life, or its love which by overflowing, so to speak prolongs itself and creates the world.'

APPENDIX B

Answers to Questions About the Spiritual Master *(see p. 73 note 11)*

It goes without saying that the modern seeker of a spiritual path and therefore of a Master is beset by dangers from many pseudo-esoteric groups which have nothing authentic to offer. And even an authentic spiritual order may prove not to correspond to the deepest aspirations of the seeker in question. In general it could be said that there are two kind of orders. One of these is relatively 'static', being under the direction of an authority who has not in himself any mastership beyond such guidance as he can transmit from the traditions of the order. The other is under a truly experienced guide, one who has himself reached the end of the path and is capable of guiding others to the end if they are sufficiently qualified.

The difference between these two orders is factual but never 'official', and the members of a 'static' order are seldom conscious of not being 'travellers'.¹ Nor must the word 'static' be taken in an absolute sense. But there are likely to be some seekers, if only a few, who are qualified for 'travel' and who, without the guidance of a veritable Master, could never do justice to their latent possibilities. What is the definition of the Master—the *guru*, the *shaykh*, the *pīr*—in the fullest sense these terms can have?

This question is the theme of a chapter entitled 'Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master' in Schuon's *Logic and*

¹ This term is taken from Sufism.

Transcendence. Its opening passages are couched in Hindu terms,² but the truths it expresses are universal. The domain is in fact spiritually too central for there to be any real divergence between the different traditional forms of mysticism. All are known to insist on the three conditions mentioned here as indispensable³ so that there is good reason to fear that if any one of the three is not fulfilled, the whole endeavour 'can only end up as a psychological exploit without any relation to the development of our higher states'. These conditions correspond to initiation, doctrine and method. The first 'results from the principle that it is impossible to approach the Absolute, or the Self, without the blessing and the aid of Heaven'. The 'blessing' in question is the sacrament of initiation which brings the recipient to a new 'birth', for the first condition of spirituality is to be virtually 'reborn'. As regards the Master, this first condition is extrinsic: unlike the others, it does not depend on his sanctity, but on his authority as duly mandated representative of a divinely instituted mystical tradition.

The Master must also personify 'a providential doctrine', that is, a doctrine which 'depends on a Revelation in the direct and plenary sense'. The essence of the doctrine is 'truth which distinguishes between the Real and the illusory'. As an incarnation of this truth, the Master is a living presence of discernment.

Finally he must be master of 'the method which allows the initiated and consecrated contemplative to fix himself, at first mentally and later with the centre of his being, on the Real'.

² This chapter was originally written for a volume presented to the Jagadguru Sri Sankarācārya Svāmīgal of Kāñci Kamakoti Pitha in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his investiture.

³ Apart from 'very exceptional cases' of which Schuon gives some illuminating examples.

It is clearly the first of these conditions which is the most frequently and easily fulfilled. The head of an authentic order which has become 'static' is necessarily qualified to bestow initiation; but only a true Master can be said to personify the doctrine of Ultimate Reality, and only he, as regards method, can enter into the Spiritual Path of his disciple to the point of enabling him 'to fix himself . . . on the Real'.

As to the seeker, the first condition presents no problems, since he can normally reassure himself, before taking any step, as to whether it has been fulfilled. He can also ascertain whether the order in question faithfully represents the tradition as regards both doctrine and method. But there the criteria may be said to end, if by criteria we mean what can be made the object of an investigation in the ordinary sense of the word. Yet though there is no infallible way for a would-be disciple to identify a true guide through purely mental processes, there is nonetheless a universal esoteric dictum⁴ that every aspirant will find a true guide if he deserves one. It is also said that in reality and despite appearances it is not the seeker who chooses the way but the way which chooses the seeker. In other words, since the Master personifies the way, he has, mysteriously and providentially, an active function towards the seeker even before the master-disciple relationship is established by initiation. This helps to explain the following anecdote told by the Moroccan Shaykh al-'Arabī ad-Darqāwī (d. 1823), one of the very greatest masters of Sufism in recent centuries. At the moment in question he was a younger man but already a representative of his own

⁴ See Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, the section on 'the Spiritual Master', pp. 288–295, for quotations from the mystics on this point and on others related to these paragraphs.

Shaykh 'Alī al-Jamal, to whom he complained of having to go to a place where he feared there were no spiritual people. His Shaykh cut him short with the remark: 'Beget the man you need'. And later he reiterated plurally the same command: 'Beget them!'⁵ We have already seen that the initial step on the spiritual path is to be 'reborn'; and all these considerations suggest that the seeker's 'deserving' of a master must include a consciousness of 'inexistence' or emptiness, an anticipation of the spiritual poverty (*faqr*) from which the *faqīr* takes his name. The open door is an image of this state, and the Shaykh ad-Darqāwī mentions in general that one of the most powerful means of obtaining a solution to a spiritual problem is to hold open and beware of closing 'the door of necessity'.⁶ It may thus be inferred that the 'deserving' in question is to be measured by the degree of the acuteness of the seeker's sense of the necessity for a guide, and that it depends on whether his soul is sufficiently imperative, as a 'vacuum', to precipitate the advent of what he needs. Nor is such passivity incompatible with the more active attitude enjoined in Christ's 'Seek and ye shall find: knock and it shall be opened unto you', since the most powerful way of 'knocking' is prayer, and supplication is a display of emptiness and an avowal of neediness. In a word, not only the Master but also the would-be disciple has qualifications to fulfil.

⁵ *Letters of a Sufi Master*, p. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 10.

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