

## RETURNING TO THE ESSENTIAL

A book by Jean Biès  
Review by Patricia Reynaud

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« The return to the essential consists essentially to a return to Unity »

In this book which includes essays written over almost half a century, Deborah Weiss-Duthilh introduces the reader to a French traditionalist author so far largely unknown in the English-speaking world. Biès was born in Bordeaux in 1933, in the Southwestern part of France, a region still permeated with the memory of the Occitania civilization and of Catharism. The repository of a genuine esoteric Christian tradition, it had been eradicated by the armies of the King of France, not long before the destruction of the Templars, which, according to René Guénon, marked a decisive step in the genesis of the modern world. Biès' writings are fraught with the sweet and our flavor of this land. This is why his book deserves a most original place within the perennialist school, not to mention its formal beauty. To our knowledge, only in Schuon's works does the reader witness a comparable poetic quality.

While most perennialist thinkers have chosen the Islamic way after Guénon and Michel Valsan, Biès while Christian, has insisted on the complementary nature of Christianity and Hinduism within the « One and Only Tradition. » The spiritual and intellectual road which Biès invites us to travel is symbolically located between the Mount Athos and Shri Ramana Maharshi Ashram. Biès' first book was devoted to Mount Athos, a place Guénon considered a truly initiatory Christian center. Eastern Christianity plays a considerable part in Biès' writings: as a true haven of a Gospel mistreated or misread over and over again since the beginning of the Modern world, it remains an inner path centering on the recitation of the divine Names, a path particularly adapted to men at the end of the *Kali-Yuga* and a merciful invitation for the Western Church. "During this rediscovery of the Prayer of the Heart, it is superfluous to say how useful and opportune it would be for disoriented Western Christians to renew ties with the Orthodox Church, guardian of this prayer (...). The entirely positive sign of the times needs to be seen in the philokalic advent, in this revelation of the last school of noticeable and accessible metaphysical realization in Christiandom." (233)

What Biès has remembered from the Orthodox Church is precisely the image of a Christ transfixed and conqueror over death rather than the

agonizing Christ of our Latin churches. For him, Orthodox Christianity, born at the crossroad between Christ revelation and Greek Intellectuality, expresses most adequately the paradox and the Mysteries of the God-Man: “The Christian East has managed to maintain the plan of syntheses, of systemic vision, under the light of intellective intuition, of that ‘supramental’ (*hypernoetos*) that Gregory Palamas spoke of before Aurobindo; faithful to the Divine himself, who includes in the himself the manifested such as the unmanifested.” (114)

He adds: “Whoever has understood the fundamental role of paradox in Christianity has understood Christianity. The paradox is the source, the essence and the meaning. This is why it is not surprising to find it in this country of the paradoxical, Orthodoxy. A paradox, this mingling of an outer appearance of robustness among numerous monks and their inner state of tenderness; a paradox, this marriage of the immanent and the transcendent through a savage and inhospitable nature and these oases of culture that monasteries are; a paradox of thunder, sign of elementary violence, in a smooth blue sky, sojourn of serenity”. (121)

The second major inspirational source of Biès is of course India, with her light, both informal and primordial. The refuge of Adam after the Fall according to the Islamic tradition and the depository of the most direct heritage of the Great Primordial Tradition, identified by Guénon as the *Sanathana Dharma*, India is personified today by Ramakrisna, the Mother’s devotee or by Ramana Maharshi. It is to India that Biès refers to for some of his most abstruse doctrinal statements or simply to draw the ideal portrait of the spiritual master.

“The spiritual master is equally indifferent to poverty and the luxury in which he is forced to live, to the affluence and rarity of disciples. His simplicity makes him flee all ostentation, all effects, never imposing his opinion. His contagious inner force inspires the wish to savor God, inaugurates the ‘itching wings’ that Plato spoke of, is the stimulator of triggering energy, and maintains fervors. His joy, entirely within, radiates through his laugh, like that of Swami Ramdas, gifted with this virtue of youthfulness that made him resemble the ‘small child’ of the Gospels, able to answer the most difficult metaphysical questions like child’s play.”(147)

Of crucial importance to Jean Biès is his meeting with Swami Siddheswaranda and his reading of Ramakrisna’s *Gospel*. In *Returning to the Essential*, Biès writes at length about his discovery of India and about the trip he took there in 1973. In his writings he surprisingly adopts a quite positive attitude about Aurobindo whereas Guénon and F. Schuon had been

quite reserved, especially at the end. Biès, different from other perennialist thinkers of the first generation, shows a remarkable benevolence and a total absence of dogmatism. From Aurobindo's he will only consider traits of orthodoxy as he particularly insists on the importance of his exegesis of the Vedas:

“Likewise, one sees the *Brahman Sutra* in Hinduism give rise to interpretations of a symbolic nature by the successors of Shankaracharya, as the Dialogues of Plato had done with the Neoplatonists. Along the same line of ideas, one would cite the different interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which followed one another from Shankara to Aurobindo, *according to new intellectual standards and without altering orthodoxy.*” (212)

These geographical travels between Greece and India are but the symbol of another one, inner and vertical. Biès is not afraid to make reference to his own spiritual journey. It is a rather unusual thing for a perennialist that is worth noticing. Another element is the fact that a few women have played in his life the part of true emissaries of wisdom. His work is less centered on a single tradition than in the case of Michel Valsan or Jean Borella and less impersonal than that of Guénon's. He mingles traditional references and shares personal accounts without ever resorting to complacency or narcissism. The biographical and even impressionistic touches of his never confuse the reader nor make him/her lose track of the transcendence of the doctrine exposed, no more than the multiplicity of theophanies should make one forget the essential unity of the transpersonal Absolute.

On the question of Christian esotericism, Biès opposes to the exotic ecumenism of “branches and roots” the “ecumenism of flowers” as the coming together of the various traditional forms from a common soil: the *Philosophia Perennis*, a true universal language of the man of the last days whose dis-occultation is a compensation for cyclical gravity.

“Universal Esotericism is the systemic vision of the Spiritual, linking together these religions (whose main role is to link together) and tracing between their different doctrinal points, over the artificial demarcations, henceforth abolished, an entire network of lines similar to those linking together the stars. For universal Esotericism, the veritable reality is a whole made up of several revelations communicating with each other at the keenest level, that of the ‘Transcendent Intellect’.”

Biès thus reminds us: “Christ himself proclaims ‘in my Father's house there are many mansions’ and they ‘shall come from the east, the west, the north, and shall sit down in the Kingdom of God’”(242). A Christian, Biès is hoping for the regeneration of a Christianity that needs to be more aware of

its Hebrew heritage and receptive to the wisdom of the East. What he foresees may be a “Catholic” Christianity in the deepest sense, that is to say aware of the other manifestations of the universal Logos and of its common origin with the other traditions: the Great Primordial Tradition symbolized by Elias and Melchizedek in the Old Testament. In that perspective, Christ, as He is understood by Christian esotericism, would be a manifestation of the Logos coming directly from the temple of this Primordial Tradition.

“In fact, Christianity in crisis undoubtedly has a duty to work essentially in a double movement. The first consists of going back to its deepest roots contained in the Hebrew tradition.... Remember that this tradition is the esoteric explanation of this ‘transmission,’ the whole of which constitutes the Torah, and for which Christ declares he never came to abolish; it is thus an integral part of the Christian heritage. The second movement consists of opening Christianity to the whole of the Eastern traditions, which, far from conflicting with it, confirm its authenticity, and in certain areas, complete it, stimulate it, make it develop. This double movement of *deepening and widening* is not at all contradictory when taken from the point of view of esotericism.” (247-248)

Biès most valuable contribution is that his book enables the harmonics of unity penetrate the soul of the reader and make him/her feel in a vibrant manner some ideas whose beauty and existential proximity were hidden by the austerity of Guénon’s scholasticism. To eternal truths, he conveys an almost familiar aspect without ever betraying their transcendence: of non-human origin, they nonetheless touch the heart of men and speak to him of himself and of his supra-sensible destiny. Reading this book, one senses the friendly and compassionate presence of a profoundly good man, a lover of divine *Sophia*. Never does one feel the imposition of a despotic “I” that St Paul identified as the very voice of the devil, but the benevolence of a friend to the truth whose ambition may have been, according to his own terms, to “versify the *Sophia Perennis*.” He also expresses the burden of a man with a traditional mind obliged to live in a world where he no longer belongs. As he evoke the character of Thyra who made him discover René Guénon, he states: “We had no idea that these revelations were to condemn us to taking a solitary road very much to the contrary of the world in which we are destined to live. We would soon be confronted with misunderstandings that could only result in endless skirmishes, hurtful disapproval, and suffering; the lucidity acquired when one has another value system, another outlook on prejudice and another inner state creates a vast difference with the surrounding environment and can be a source of suffering. For people like

us, the time would be especially contrary: friendships would be more unlikely, even getting married could be compromised; the distance from centers of interest where people in universal agreement congregate was growing. We would always be ‘somewhere else.’ In the midst of mass hysteria and unanimous false certainty, the only thing to do would be to keep quiet and live secretly.” (37-38)

He is also quite lucid about the spiritual capabilities of a man with a traditional mind who happens to live in a modern world: “It is unlikely that the modern Westerner will ever attain divine contemplation” (229). He does not hesitate to warn him against a few hurtles on the Path: the obsession of being an Initiate, the fascination of the formless: “The Westerner should not try to achieve supreme ecstasy-*nirvikalpa Samadhi*; he should stop if he feels troubling symptoms. ‘Meditation about the Without-Form’ will be less recommended to him than ‘meditations with attributes.’ The most important point is that once his appropriate path has been found, he should stay on it without losing sight of his goal: first slow down, then cure the hyper-mentalization which does him so much harm. Such a practice will make clear the future necessity of ‘burning books’.” (103)

This warmth is everything but dull or sentimental. Neither weakness nor complacency taints his condemnation of the modern world. A witness inspired by the sublime beauty of the principle, Biès proves also uncompromising as he denounces with the lucidity of a mature man the general subversion and traps of the Enemy, thus confirming the prognostic that Guénon had made at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the genesis of the modern world and its consequences. Biès uses the rhetoric of criticism with discernment and cleverness, inviting the reader to destroy the idols of the Promethean man or rather to turn them around in order to retrieve the overarching Ideas. Nothing is reactionary or reactive in his thought from which emanates a will to make Truth prevail in one’s heart. Who would still dare to say, after reading this book, that Perennialism has been but the revival of an everlasting secularism, a matrix of fascism and of extremism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? To the defenders of the “Human Rights,” heirs to the Enlightenment and rationalist thought, he reminds us with courage of the more essential yet “rights of God” that is to say the rights of the divine *in the human being*. Man is a rational mind in a body of flesh; however, man is also a spirit whose only nourishment is Truth itself without which he soon would be reduced to the state of a human animal, this “last of men” Nietzsche described in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Biès enumerates the

quadruple murder by which the Promethean man came to be doomed by the hell of the reign of the quantity.

“A peculiar feature of ignorance is the refusal of knowledge and the disposal of it all the more willingly with impunity. While waiting to destroy himself in a vast collective holocaust, man has already been found guilty of a least four murders whose blood has splashed up on him from century to century. First the murder of the Father, by proclaiming universal and mandatory atheism and affirming solely ‘Human rights’ against the rights of God. Then the murder of the Son, which corresponds to the previous one and is prefigured by the blow of the lance that pierced Christ’s flank; thus the ‘theology of the death of God.’ By way of consequence, the murder of Mother Nature, victim of the willpower of strength, pollution and the loss of the meaning of holiness. With this triple murder, man is already a patricide, a fratricide, a matricide and an orphan. But there is a fourth one, more discreet and also tragic: the murder of the spiritual master (...). Whether he is killed by a human hand or soul, the master dies for the one he loves.” (158-159)

These texts and their excellent translation by Deborah Weiss-Dutilh offer us a new aspect of the Perennialist school, now available to an English-speaking audience. It is an original contribution to what S.H. Nasr called “the rediscovery of the Tradition” while at the same time an invitation to return to the essential Unity of the Supreme Self. In his works, Biès bears witness of the contemporary radiating influence of the *Sophia Perennis* and comes to remind us that from the throes of the Dark Age is to be born a new Golden Age whose sages are the door keepers: “The time of the essential takes its time: it has the talent for maturing. It is the one made by the sages.” (253)