

Titus Burckhardt and the Perennialist School

Titus Burckhardt, a German Swiss, was born in Florence in 1908 and died in Lausanne in 1984. He devoted all his life to the study and exposition of the different aspects of Wisdom and Tradition.

In the age of modern science and technocracy, Titus Burckhardt was one of the most remarkable of the exponents of universal truth, in the realm of metaphysics as well as in the realm of cosmology and of traditional art. In a world of existentialism, psychoanalysis, and sociology, he was a major voice of the *philosophia perennis*, that “wisdom uncreate” that is expressed in Platonism, Vedanta, Sufism, Taoism, and other authentic esoteric or sapiential teachings. In literary and philosophic terms, he was an eminent member of the “traditionalist” or “perennialist” school of twentieth-century thinkers and writers.

The two originators of the perennialist school were the Frenchman René Guénon (1886—1951) and the German Frithjof Schuon (1907—1998). It may be of interest to note in passing that two other celebrated wisdom schools had dual originators, namely, those associated with Socrates and Plato in 5th century B.C. Athens, and with Rumi and Shams ad-Dîn Tabrîzî in 13th century Turkey.

René Guénon traced the origin of what he called the modern deviation to the ending of the Middle Ages and the arrival of the Renaissance, that cataclysmic inrush of secularization, when nominalism vanquished realism, individualism (or humanism) replaced universalism, and empiricism banished scholasticism. An important part of Guénon’s work was therefore his critique of the modern world from an implacably “Platonic” or metaphysical point of view. This was fully expounded in his two masterly volumes *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*. The positive side of Guénon’s work was his exposition of the immutable principles of universal metaphysics and traditional orthodoxy. His main source was the Shankaran doctrine of “non-duality” (*advaita*), and his chief work in this respect is *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*. However, he also turned readily to other traditional sources, since he considered all traditional forms to be various expressions of the one supra-formal Truth. Another important aspect of Guénon’s work was his brilliant exposition of the intellectual content of traditional symbols, from whichever religion they might come. See in this connection his *Fundamental Symbols of Sacred Science*.

It is important to note that Guénon’s writings, decisively important though they were, were purely “theoretical” in character, and made no pretense of dealing with the question of realization. In other words, they were generally concerned with intellectuality (or doctrine) and not directly with spirituality (or method).

The sun rose for the traditionalist school with the appearance of the work of Frithjof Schuon. Thirty years ago, an English Thomist wrote of him: “His work has the intrinsic authority of a contemplative intelligence.” <1> More recently, a senior American academic declared: “In depth and breadth, a paragon of our time. I know of no living thinker who begins to rival him.” <2> T. S. Eliot’s perception was similar. Regarding Schuon’s first book, he

wrote in 1953: “I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion”.

Schuon wrote more than twenty philosophical books in French, and, towards the end of his life, a cycle of more than 3,000 didactic poems in his native German. His philosophical works began to appear during the latter part of Guénon’s life. Until his dying day, Guénon used to refer to him (for example in the pages of *Études Traditionnelles*) as “notre éminent collaborateur”. Schuon continued, in even more notable fashion, the perspicacious and irrefutable critique of the modern world, and reached unsurpassable heights in his exposition of the essential truth — illuminating and saving — that lies at the heart of every revealed form. Schuon called this supra-formal truth the *religio perennis*. This term, which does not imply a rejection of the similar terms *philosophia perennis* and *sophia perennis*, nevertheless contains a hint of an additional dimension which is unfailingly present in Schuon’s writings. This is that intellectual understanding entails a spiritual responsibility, that intelligence requires to be complemented by sincerity and faith, and that “seeing” (in height) implies “believing” (in depth). In other words, the greater our perception of essential and saving truth, the greater our obligation towards an effort of inward or spiritual “realization”.

Schuon’s work began with a comprehensive general study, the very title of which serves to set the scene: *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. His further works include: *Language of the Self* (on Hinduism), *Treasures of Buddhism*, *Understanding Islam*, *Castes and Races*, *Logic and Transcendence* and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, a wide-ranging compendium of philosophic and spiritual enlightenment.

The work of Guénon and Schuon did not remain unnoticed. Almost immediately, it gave rise to two illustrious continuators: the Indian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) who wrote in English, and the German Swiss Titus Burckhardt, who wrote in both German and French.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, an illustrious scholar, was already known as an authority on the art and esthetics of both East and West when he encountered the works of Guénon. Although this occurred relatively late in his life, he was thoroughly convinced by the traditionalist viewpoint as expounded in Guénon’s books. His vast erudition enabled him to demonstrate in fascinating detail the manifold flowering of the traditional civilizations to which the great revelations gave rise. Coomaraswamy’s principal earlier works include *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *The Dance of Shiva* (1912), *Rajput Paintings* (1916), *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (1927) and *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927). Amongst the more important books of his later period are *Christian and Oriental or True Philosophy of Art* (1943), and *Figures of Speech and Figures of Thought* (1946) and *Am I My Brother’s Keeper* (1947).

We shall turn presently to the other continuator, Titus Burckhardt, but first let us take a closer look at what is meant by the *Religio perennis*.*

One of the basic tenets of the *Religio perennis* is that, at the center of each religion, there is a core of truth (about God, man, prayer, morality, and salvation) which is identical. In

other words, in spite of the plurality of forms, there is a common essence. In addition, within each religion, there is also a means of salvation, which is essentially a way of union. This doctrine of essential or transcendent unity has its source in universal metaphysics, which (in Vedantic terms) is fundamentally discernment between the Absolute (*Âtmâ*) and the relative (*Mâyâ*). According to this doctrine — as represented variously by Shankara (Hinduism), Plato (Greece), Eckhart (Christianity), and Ibn ‘Arabî (Islam) — only the Divine Essence (“Beyond-Being”) is Absolute, whereas the Creator or Personal God (“Being”), as the first self-determination of the Divine Essence (“Beyond-Being”), is already within the domain of the relative. The Creator, nevertheless, is “absolute” with regard to his creation, and in view of this can be qualified as “the relatively absolute”. The Personal God, as originator of creation, is “the prefiguration of the relative in the Absolute”. With regard to creation, on the other hand, one can speak of a “reflection of the Absolute in the relative”, and this is the *Avatâra*; the Prophet; the Savior; it is also Truth, Beauty, and Virtue; Symbol and Sacrament. This brings us to the doctrine of the Logos, with its two faces, created and uncreated: The “prefiguration of the relative in the Absolute” (the Creator or Personal God) is the *uncreated* Logos; the “reflection of the Absolute in the relative” (the *Avatâra*; Symbol, or Sacrament) is the *created* Logos. This is already an indication of what is meant by a means of salvation: the religious adherent, by uniting himself sacramentally with the created Logos, finds therein a means of uniting himself with the Uncreated: namely, God as such.

Let us now return to Titus Burckhardt: although he first saw the light of day in Florence, Burckhardt was the scion of a patrician family of Basle. He was the great-nephew of the famous art-historian Jacob Burckhardt and the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt. Titus Burckhardt was Frithjof Schuon’s junior by one year, and they spent their early schooldays together in Basle around the time of the First World War. This was the beginning of an intimate friendship and a deeply harmonious intellectual and spiritual relationship that was to last a lifetime.

Burckhardt’s chief metaphysical exposition, beautifully complementing the work of Schuon, is *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*. This is an intellectual masterpiece which analyzes comprehensively and with precision the nature of esoterism as such. It begins by making clear, by a series of lucid and economical definitions, what esoterism is and what it is not, goes on to examine the doctrinal foundations of Islamic esoterism or Sufism, and ends with an inspired description of “spiritual alchemy”, or the contemplative path that leads to spiritual realization. This work clearly established Burckhardt as the leading exponent, after Schuon, of intellectual doctrine and spiritual method.

Burckhardt devoted a large portion of his writings to traditional cosmology, which he saw in a sense as the “handmaid of metaphysics”. He formally presented the principles at stake in a masterly and concise article “The Cosmological Perspective”, first published in French in 1948 and now constituting a chapter in the present volume. Much later — in a series of articles published in both French and German in 1964 — he covered the cosmological ground very fully indeed, and also made many detailed references to the main branches of modern science. All of these articles are included in the present book, in the section entitled “Traditional and Modern Science”.

Not unconnected with his interest in cosmology, Burckhardt had a particular affinity with traditional art and craftsmanship and was skilled in the evaluation of traditional architecture, iconography, and other arts and crafts. In particular, he dwelt on how they had been — and could be — turned to account spiritually, both as meaningful activities which by virtue of their inherent symbolism harbor a doctrinal message, and above all as supports for spiritual realization and means of grace. *Ars sine scientiâ nihil*. Here of course it is a case of *scientia sacra* and *ars sacra*, these being the two sides of the same coin. This is the realm of the craft initiations of the various traditional civilizations, and specifically of such things, in the Middle Ages, as operative masonry and alchemy. Indeed Burckhardt's principal work in the field of cosmology was his full-length book *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, a brilliant presentation of alchemy as the expression of a spiritual psychology and as an intellectual and symbolic support for contemplation and realization.

Burckhardt's main work in the field of art was his *Sacred Art in East and West*, which contains masterly chapters on the metaphysics and esthetics of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam, and ends with a useful and practical insight into the contemporary situation entitled "The Decadence and Renewal of Christian Art".

During the fifties and sixties Burckhardt was the artistic director of the Urs Graf Publishing House of Lausanne and Olten. His main activity during these years was the production and publication of a whole series of facsimiles of exquisite illuminated medieval manuscripts, especially early Celtic manuscripts of the Gospels, such as the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow (from Trinity College, Dublin) and the Book of Lindisfarne (from the British Library, London). This was pioneer work of the highest quality and a publishing achievement which immediately received wide acclaim both from experts and the wider public.

His production of the magnificent facsimile of the Book of Kells brought him a remarkable encounter with Pope Pius XII. The Urs Graf Publishing House wished to present a copy of the edition to the saintly and princely Pope, and it was decided that there could be no better person to effect the presentation than their artistic director Burckhardt. In the eyes of the Pope, Burckhardt was ostensibly a Protestant gentleman from Basle. The Pope granted him a private audience at his summer residence at Castelgandolfo. When, in the audience chamber, the white-clad figure of the Pope suddenly appeared, he welcomingly approached his visitor and said to him in German: "Sie sind also Herr Burckhardt?" ("So you are Herr Burckhardt?") Burckhardt bowed and, when the Pope offered him his hand bearing the Fisherman's Ring, he respectfully took it in his. As a non-Catholic, however, he kissed, not the ring (as is the custom amongst Catholics), but the Pope's fingers. "Which the Pope smilingly permitted," Burckhardt adds.

Together they talked about the Dark Ages and about the surpassingly beautiful manuscripts of the Gospels that had been so lovingly and so finely produced during them. At the end of the audience the Pope gave his blessing: "From my heart I bless you, your family, your colleagues, and your friends."

It was during these years with the Urs Graf Publishing House that Burckhardt presided over an interesting series of publications with the general title of *Stätten des Geistes* (“Homesteads of the Spirit”). These were historical-cum-spiritual studies of certain manifestations of sacred civilization, and covered such themes as Mount Athos, Celtic Ireland, Sinai, Constantinople, and other places. Burckhardt himself contributed three books in the series: *Siena: City of the Virgin*, *Chartres and the Birth of the Cathedral*, and *Fez: City of Islam*. *Siena* is an enlightening account of the rise and fall of a Christian city which, architecturally speaking, remains to this day something of a Gothic jewel. Most interesting of all, however, is the story of its saints. Burckhardt devotes many of his pages to St. Catherine of Siena (who, amongst other things, was a powerful influence on the Pope of her day) and to St. Bernardino of Siena (who was one of the greatest Catholic practitioners — and teachers — of the invocatory mode of prayer, based on the saving power of the Holy Name). *Chartres* is the story of the religious “idealism” (in the best sense of the word) which lay behind the conception and practical realization of the medieval Cathedrals — the still extant monuments of an age of faith. In *Chartres*, Burckhardt expounds the intellectual and spiritual contents of the different architectural styles — distinguishing in this respect not merely between the Gothic and the Romanesque, but even between the different varieties of the Romanesque. It is a dazzling example of what is meant by intellectual discernment or discrimination.

One of Burckhardt’s several masterpieces is undoubtedly his *Fez, City of Islam*. As a young man, in the 1930’s, he spent a few years in Morocco, where he established intimate friendships with several remarkable representatives of the as yet intact spiritual heritage of the Maghrib. This was obviously a formative period in Burckhardt’s life, and much of his subsequent message and style originates in these early years. Already, at the time concerned, he had committed much of his experience to writing (not immediately published), and it was only in the late 1950’s that these writings and these experiences ripened into a definitive and masterly book. In *Fez, City of Islam*, Burckhardt relates the history of a people and its religion — a history that was often violent, often heroic, and sometimes holy. Throughout it all runs the thread of Islamic piety and civilization. These Burckhardt expounds with a sure and enlightening hand, relating many of the teachings, parables, and miracles of the saints of many centuries, and demonstrating not only the arts and crafts of Islamic civilization, but also its “Aristotelian” sciences and its administrative skills. There is indeed much to be learnt about the governance of men and nations from Burckhardt’s penetrating presentation of the principles behind dynastic and tribal vicissitudes — with their failures and their successes.

Close in spirit to *Fez* is another of Burckhardt’s mature works, namely *Moorish Culture in Spain*. As always, this is a book of truth and beauty, science and art, piety and traditional culture. But in this book, perhaps more than in all others, it is a question of the romance, chivalry, and poetry of pre-modern life.

During his early years in Morocco, Burckhardt immersed himself in the Arabic language and assimilated the principal classics of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) in their original form. In later years, he was to share these treasures with a wider public through his translations of Ibn ‘Arabî <3> and Jîlî <4>. One of his most important works of translation was of the spiritual letters of the renowned 18th-century Moroccan Shaikh Mulay al-‘Arabî ad-

Darqâwî <5>. These letters constitute a spiritual classic and are a precious document of practical spiritual counsel.

Burckhardt's last major work was his widely acclaimed and impressive monograph *Art of Islam*. Here the intellectual principles and the spiritual role of artistic creativity in its Islamic forms are richly and generously displayed before us. With this noble volume, the unique Burckhardtian literary corpus comes to its end.

William Stoddart.

*The works of these four key figures of the perennialist school did not remain without effect. Their influence soon began to spread, and other perennialist writers appeared on the scene, not only on the Continent of Europe, but also in the English-speaking world. Amongst the latter are Martin Lings, Whitall Perry, Marco Pallis, Lord Northbourne, and Kenneth Oldmeadow. Several distinguished Islamicists, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, also took the tenets of the Religio perennis as the basis of their expositions.

<1> Bernard Kelly, in *Dominican Studies* (London), Vol. 7, 1954.

<2> Emeritus Professor Huston Smith, 1974.

<3> *La Sagesse des Prophètes* (Fusûs al-Hikam), Albin Michel, Paris, 1955.

<4> *De l'Homme Universel* (al-Insân al-Kâmil), Derain, Lyons, 1953.

<5> *Letters of a Sufi Master* (Rasâ'il), Perennial Books, Bedfont, England, 1969.