

# Introduction to the Perennialist School

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René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) are the main figures of the Perennialist school, a school of thought that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, has developed a radical criticism of modernity on the basis of traditional metaphysics (such as Sufism, Platonism or Advaita Vedanta). The Perennialist School, not synonymous in every respect with the Traditionalist School, has given its contemporary expression to the Sophia Perennis or Perennial Philosophy.

## Modernity, tradition and Primordial Tradition

Rejecting the idea of progress and the enlightenment paradigm, Perennialist authors describe modern civilization as a pseudo and decadent civilization, which manifests the lowest possibilities of the *Kali Yuga* (the Dark Age of the Hindu cosmology). To the “modern error,” the Perennialists oppose an everlasting wisdom of divine origin, “a Primordial Tradition”, transmitted from the very origin of humanity and partially restored by each genuine founder of a new religion.

Perennialists have a very specific definition of “Tradition.” Tradition implies the idea of a transmission (*tradere*), but for Guénon and his followers, tradition does not have a human origin and may be considered as principles revealed from Heaven and binding man to his divine origin. Beyond the diversity of religious forms, they discern a single Tradition (with a capital letter), what Schuon called a “transcendent unity”. They claim that the historically separated traditions share not only the same divine origin but are based on the same metaphysical principles, sometimes called *philosophia perennis*.

So far as can be discovered, the term “*philosophia perennis*” is modern, first appearing in the Renaissance. Though the term “*philosophia perennis*” is widely associated with the philosopher Leibniz who himself owes it from the sixteenth century theologian Augustinus Steuchius. But the ideal of such a philosophy is much older and one could easily recognize it in the Golden Chain (*seira*) of Neoplatonism, in the Patristic *Lex primordialis*, in the Islamic *Din al-Fitra* or even in the Hindu *Sanathana Dharma*.

## The Rediscovery of the Sophia Perennis in the writings of René Guénon

The French author, René Guénon (1886-1951) was in a certain sense a pioneer in the rediscovery of this *Philosophia Perennis* or better *Sophia Perennis* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His view largely shared with later Perennialist authorities, is that Semitic religions have an exoteric/esoteric

structure. Exoterism, the outward dimension of religion, is constituted by religious rites and a moral but also a dogmatic theology. The exoteric point of view is characterized by its “sentimentalist”, rather than purely intellectual nature and remains fairly limited. Based on the doctrine of creation and the subsequent duality between God and creation, exoterism does not offer means to transcend the limitations of the human state. The goal is only religious salvation that Guénon defines as a perpetual state of beatitude in a celestial paradise.

In Guénon’s view, esoterism is more than the complement of exoterism, the spirit as opposed to the letter, the kernel with respect to the shell. Esoterism has at least *de jure*, a total autonomy with respect to religion for its innermost substance is the Primordial Tradition itself. Based on pure metaphysics -by which Guénon means a supra-rational knowledge of the Divine, a gnosis, and not a rationalist system or theological dogma- its goal is the realization of the superior states of being and finally the union between the individual self and the Principle. Guénon calls this union “the Supreme Identity”.

By Principle, Guénon means more than the personal God of exoteric theology: the supra-personal Essence, the Beyond-Being, the Absolute both totally transcendent and immanent to the manifestation. In Guénon’s view the innermost essence of the individual being is non-different from the Absolute itself. Guénon refers here to the Vedantic concepts of *Brahman* (Principle), *Atma* (Self) and *Moksa* (Deliverance). This reference is not accidental or circumstantial. For Guénon, the Hindu *Sanathana Dharma* represents in fact “the more direct heritage of the Primordial Tradition”. More generally, the great traditions of Asia (Advaita Vedanta, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism) play a paradigmatic function in his writings. He considers them as the more rigorous expression of pure metaphysics, this supra-formal and universal wisdom being nevertheless in itself neither eastern nor western.

Contrary to the Semitic religions, those Asian religions don’t have an esoterism/exoterism structure which has emerged only later in the historical cycle, at a time of growing spiritual decadence, where the vast majority of the people were no longer “qualified” to understand metaphysical truths and transcendent possibilities of the human state. For Guénon, the author of the *Crisis of the Modern World*, the end of this descending process is modernity itself. The tragedy of the Western world since the Renaissance is, in his view, that it has lost almost any contact with the *Sophia Perennis*. Consequently, in the Western context, it is virtually impossible for a spiritual seeker to receive a valid initiation and to follow an esoteric path.

Although, he has pleaded in his first books for a restoration of traditional “intellectualité” in the West on the basis of Roman Catholicism and Freemasonry, it is clear that Guénon, very early on, gave up the idea of a spiritual resurrection of the West on a purely Christian basis. Having denounced the lure of Theosophism and neo-occultism, two influential movements that were flourishing in his lifetime, Guénon was initiated in 1912 in the Shadhili order and moved to Cairo in 1930 where he spent the rest of his life as a Sufi Muslim. To his many correspondents, he clearly

designated Sufism as the more accessible form of traditional initiation for Westerners eager to find what does not exist any more in the West: a initiatory path of knowledge (*Jnana* or *Gnosis*), comparable to Advaita.

### **Frithjof Schuon and the Religio Perennis**

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), one generation younger than Guénon, was among his early readers. Having read in his youth the Bhagavad-Gita, the Koran and the Plato, Schuon accepted immediately Guénon's criticism of modernity and defense of the Tradition and became one of his collaborators in Guénon's journal *Les Etudes Traditionnelles*. Schuon will nevertheless criticize later in time some aspects of Guénon's exposition, particularly his Manichean opposition between East and West and his theories on early Christianity.

After Guénon's death in 1951, Schuon, in more than twenty books, has developed his own metaphysical perspective, developing the concept of *Religio Perennis*, he considers less ambiguous than Guénon's Primordial Tradition. Schuon's *Religio Perennis* cannot be called a new religion with its own dogma and practices. For Schuon, the *Religio Perennis* is the "underlying Religion," the "Religion of the Heart" or the *Religio Concordis*. He claims that Esoterists in every orthodox tradition have a more or less direct access to it but, according to his perspective, it cannot be a question of practicing the *Religio Perennis* independently. Religious forms can be more or less transparent but religious diversity is not denied for its *raison d'être* is metaphysically explained. On the one hand, for Schuon, formal religions are *upaya* ("celestial strategy"), superimpositions on the core-essence of the *Religio Perennis*. On the other hand, religious forms correspond to as many archetypes in the divine Word itself. Religious forms are "willed by God" and each religion corresponds to a particular and homogenous cosmos, characterized by its own perspective on the Absolute.

The Perennialist perspective itself, as it has been expressed in its definitive form by Schuon, can thus been characterized as essentially metaphysical, esoteric, primordial but also traditional. For Schuon, there is no spiritual path outside of a revealed religion, which provides spiritual seekers with a metaphysical doctrine and a spiritual method, but also with a spiritual environment of beauty and sacredness.

Whereas both Guénon and Coomaraswamy had almost exclusively a purely intellectual influence, Schuon was not only a genuine metaphysician but also a spiritual master. Since 1932, when, moved by a desire to get in contact with Sufism, he spent several months in Mostaganem, he was the direct disciple of the Algerian Sufi Shaykh Ahmad Al-Alawi (1869 –1934). He received the Islamic name of Isa Nur Ad-Din, "Jesus Light of Religion". Technically, the Sufi brotherhood (*tariqa*), Schuon has organized in the mid-1930's in Europe with the approval of Shaykh Adda

Bentounès, the successor of the Shaykh Alawi, was a regular branch of the Shadhiliyya Darqawiyya Alawiyya order.

Many Western readers of Guénon but also born Muslims have found in this teachings, a practical application of and a complement to the doctrine exposed by Guénon but also an opportunity to escape religious exclusivism. Whereas, many Turuq in North Africa or the Middle East, particularly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remain very close to the exoteric and exclusivist mentality, Schuon's teachings were by contrast clearly oriented toward pure esoterism and its message was universalistic.

According to Schuon, this "quintessential esoterism" and the *Religio Perennis* itself are personified by the Virgin Mary. He called her, following the Iranian Sufi Ruzebam Baqli, "the Mother of all the Prophets and the Prophecy and the Substance of the original Sainthood". Schuon himself considered that his teachings, although located in the frame of Islam and Sufism, were in a certain sense at the confluent of the great religious traditions of the world (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism primarily but also Mahayana Buddhism, Neoplatonism and the Native American Traditions). In terms of spiritual discipline, it was centered on the Invocation of the Divine Name (*dhikr*, *Japa-Yoga*, prayer of the Heart), considered by him as the best and providential mean of realization at the end of the Kali Yuga.

### **Traditionalism or Perennialism?**

It could be argued that Traditionalism and Perennialism are synonymous, "traditionalism" being used mostly in France and Europe. However, Guénon himself dismissed the term of traditionalist because it implies in his view a kind of sentimental attachment to a tradition which, most of the time, has lost its metaphysical foundation.

At another level, Perennialist School refers more specifically to Frithjof Schuon and his legacy (Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr), rather than René Guénon or Ananda Coomaraswamy. Whereas for most French intellectuals, Guénon remains the central figure of the school, in the rest of Europe and in the US, Frithjof Schuon is regarded as the author who has given to the perennialist message its definitive synthesis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His teaching is clearly more subtle and less Manichean than Guénon's who was also very much influenced by neo-occultism and a 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic view of the East. Schuon's teaching also clearly includes dimensions such as art and moral philosophy that were never addressed by Guénon. Schuon's perspective is also less academic and more directly oriented toward the spiritual life than Ananda Coomaraswamy's. Schuon, as the disciple of the Shaykh Alawi was also the only of these three figures to have assumed an initiatory function.

Finally, Tradition is only one aspect of Schuon's teaching. More objectively than Guénon, Schuon acknowledges the contradictions between pure metaphysics -based on the intellect and

the nature of things- and Tradition that he described, unlike Guénon, not a pure Good but as a lesser evil.

### **Julius Evola and the Perennialist School**

It is also important to make the following remark. Certain figures such as Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), Henry Corbin (1903-1978) and Julius Evola (1898-1974) cannot be considered as members of the Perennialist school, despite the fact that they have been influenced at some levels by Perennialism and may have used some of their ideas to support their own views.

As far as Evola is concerned, he was influenced by racist theories and the philosophy of Nietzsche, long before reading Guénon. More important, he deviated from the core of Perennialist teaching on far too many points to be considered as part of Guénon's legacy. His books, and his perspective on the Modern World, initiation and the relationship between action and contemplation have been strongly criticized by Guénon and Titus Burckhardt. Whereas the Perennialist perspective is centered on contemplation and knowledge, Evola professes the superiority of action, inverting the hierarchy between Brahmins and Kshatriyas and developing his own political theories and philosophy of history. In Evola's *Revolt against the modern world*, he argues that there is not one Tradition, but two: A lower tradition that is feminine; a higher one that is masculine and purely Aryan in its origin. Evola also develops a strong anti-Christian sentiment and has influenced neo-pagan movements whose aims may have been considered as purely illusory, if not anti-traditional by Guénon, had he lived longer. By contrast with Evola's involvement into Italian Fascism, Guénon and Schuon clearly avoided any political involvement. Coomaraswamy's only political engagement was connected to the Indian movement for independence and resulted in his exile to the US.

Considering these elements, the category of "Political Perennialism" used by Mark Sedgwick in his recent and debated book on the Perennialist Movement (Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 368 pages.) seems rather misleading, if not inaccurate.

### **Selective bibliography**

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Perennialists believe that the focus of education should be the ideas that have lasted over centuries. They believe the ideas are as relevant and meaningful today as when they were written. They recommend that students learn from reading and analyzing the works by history's finest thinkers and writers. Essentialists believe that when students study these works and ideas, they will appreciate learning. "The educational focus of Perennialism is on the need to return to the past, namely, to the universal truths and absolutely reason and faith (Foundations of American Education Sixth Edition Pg. 70)." Perennialist believe that God and education goes together hand in hand, and that education prepeares a person for life.