

[from *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, 47, Summer 2021]

Modern Discontents and the Wisdom of the Ages

A Conversation with Harry Oldmeadow

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Harry Oldmeadow was for many years the Coordinator of Philosophy and Religious Studies at La Trobe University, Bendigo (Victoria, Australia). He was born in Melbourne in 1947. His parents were Christian missionaries in India, where he spent nine years of his childhood and developed an early interest in the civilizations and religions of the East. Dr. Oldmeadow is a recognized authority on the Traditionalist or Perennialist school of comparative religious thought. He lives with his wife in Bendigo.

He has published extensively in different journals and authored, edited, and coauthored many books, including *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy* (2000; reissued 2011), *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (2004), *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (edited 2005), *Light from the East: Eastern Wisdom for the Modern West* (edited 2007), *A Christian Pilgrim in India: The Spiritual Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux)* (2008), *Mediations: Essays on the Perennial Philosophy and Religious Pluralism* (2008), *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (edited 2010), *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (2010), *Touchstones of the Spirit: Essays on Religion, Tradition, and Modernity* (2012), and *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary: The Oglala Holy Man and Sioux Tradition* (2018).

The conversation was conducted on June 12, 2020, through an online platform allowing Dr. Oldmeadow to address the questions from his home in Australia.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: Perhaps we could begin by starting with your extraordinary upbringing that immersed you in the complexity of human diversity and religious pluralism and the enduring impact it has had on your perspective?

Harry Oldmeadow: I was born in 1947, and after the first couple of years of my life my parents moved to India as missionaries; we were in northern India, not too far from Benares. They were Methodist missionaries. We spent nine years in India. I spent some of the time at a boarding school in Mussoorie in the Himalayan foothills, and the rest of the time in a town called Azamgarh, which was predominantly a Hindu community, although there were a large number of Muslims, Sikhs, and various other smaller groups. I was about two and a half when we moved there, so I picked up the Hindi and Urdu languages very quickly. I had many Indian friends, so from a very early age I was conscious of this cultural diversity, different languages, different ways of seeing and being in the world, different religious traditions. So, I suppose that left some sort of impression and disposition. My father was actually very interested in other religions. There were conversations

around the dinner table; there were books about different traditions that were in my father's library; all of these influences pervaded the atmosphere, you might say.

SBS: Could you please talk about how you came to learn about the exponents of the perennial philosophy or the transcendent unity of religions such as René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), among others and how this framework informs your work?

HO: I came across the traditionalists in 1974. I can remember quite clearly the very first encounter. I was reading a music review in a weekly magazine/newspaper, a review of a new album from the Grateful Dead. My eye wandered down the page and I saw a book review; the book was *The Sword of Gnosis* [1974] edited by Jacob Needleman [b. 1934] and published in the Penguin Metaphysical Library. This was the first thing that I encountered. As soon as I started to read that book, I was engrossed, a little bit bewildered, deeply impressed and thoroughly shaken about.

There were many splendid things in that anthology, but three pieces made an immediate mark: an essay by Schuon entitled “No Activity Without Truth,” Guénon’s “Oriental Metaphysics,” and Burckhardt’s “Cosmology and Modern Science.” I then sought out books by all of the contributors. But they were not easy to find in those days in Australia. It was before the internet, so you could not look things up and order them; you had to physically find them. I was living at Canberra at this stage, so I went to Melbourne as it had the best bookshops as far as spirituality and mysticism were concerned. I loaded up with books by Guénon, Schuon, Coomaraswamy, and others, took them home, and steadily made my way through them. Within a few months of coming across *The Sword of Gnosis*, I found myself deeply immersed in this entirely new and unfamiliar way of understanding things. Seyyed Hossein Nasr [b. 1933] has said of the appearance of Guénon’s earliest works on Hinduism in the early 1920s that it was like “a sudden burst of lightning,”¹ and this was how it was for me; it was like a bolt of lightning. So, things moved on from there.

SBS: In recent years, the exponents of the perennial philosophy have been erroneously identified with extreme political movements and perceived to be asserting a secret political agenda, which is at the very antipodes of this perspective that is essentially apolitical.² It appears that the affirmation of the universal and timeless truths found within all traditions has been subverted for dubious if not questionable ends. Can you please elaborate this confused development?

HO: Yes, this has indeed been a very alarming development, as associated for example, with figures such as Julius Evola [1898–1974] and Alexander Dugin [b. 1962]. To put the matter bluntly, what we see here is an outlook which is reactionary, racist, xenophobic, and fascistic—which is to say intensely political and ideological, one which seeks some sort of legitimation in the works, particularly, of René Guénon. In recent times even Steve Bannon [b. 1953] has claimed to draw some inspiration from the works of Guénon, a quite absurd claim in the face of Bannon’s extreme Islamophobia. Perennialism proper has generally been rigorously non-political, addressing itself primarily to the exposition and preservation of the metaphysical and cosmological

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Rediscovery of the Sacred: The Revival of Tradition,” in *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 101.

² “[W]e set little store by spontaneous movements, whether in the political or the religious order.” (René Guénon, “The Origins of Spiritism,” in *The Spiritist Fallacy*, trans. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy [Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004], p. 23).

principles which inform all integral religious traditions. Coomaraswamy signals their general stance when he writes “politics and economics, although they cannot be ignored, are the most external and least part of our problem.”³ I cannot stress too heavily that the various fascistic offshoots of traditionalism should not be confused with the genuine article.⁴

SBS: Today the religions are fraught with myriad problems, making it very challenging for the contemporary seeker to make sense of what religion truly is. We have several polarized portrayals of what religion is: one is the phenomena of *religious fundamentalism*; the second is the phenomena *atheism* (and its updated version, what is known the New Atheism as represented by Richard Dawkins (b. 1941), Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011), Sam Harris (b. 1967), and Daniel C. Dennett (b. 1942); and the third is the phenomena of *New Age counterfeit-spirituality*, which presents many challenges to the integral understanding of what religion truly is. Could you speak to this dilemma and how seekers can understand religion in our times?

HO: A very important idea which is difficult for people to grasp in the present climate, but which is crucial if you want to approach religion in the right manner, concerns our understanding of time. If we look at the Western mindset over the past few hundred years, one of the most pernicious ideas that has really taken a grip is the idea of “progress.” People nowadays tend to assume that things are getting better, in some mysterious way which nobody understands, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. We only have to look at the twentieth century objectively, dispassionately; if we do so it is very hard to maintain a belief in progress. In fact, the very opposite appears to be happening: things are going downhill.

We need to free ourselves of this idea of progress and replace it with another idea, which Guénon articulates very powerfully: the truth does not change, the truth does not “evolve,” and human cultures do not “progress.” If the traditions, Revelations and messages of the great figures of Jesus, Muhammad and the Buddha and so on—if they were true then, they are true now. We cannot improve on those messages; we cannot improve on those Revelations. Modern science, whatever benefits it may or may not have brought, has nothing to add, nothing to say about these eternal verities. What we are searching for is not to be found in the latest intellectual fashion, not in what this pop guru or scientist says; what we want is an imperishable Truth, something that is true always, everywhere, not subject to the contingencies of time and the vicissitudes of the day.

Now, where do we find such a thing, where do we find this unchanging truth? There are two places we can find it. Schuon signposts these sources by the terms *Intellection* and *Revelation*. Intellection occurs when an individual is able to apprehend directly truth of a supra-sensorial kind—not an empirical or experimental truth, nor one attained by ratiocination or cerebration, but a deeper truth that can be realized through a personal experience, a deep and spontaneous intuition of truths which normally lie outside our purview. But this is comparatively rare; it can happen anywhere and at any time, but not many people are blessed with that opportunity. The great sages have had that experience but most of us have not. Or we can turn to Revelation, that is to say, to those messages which have been communicated to us through various means at different points in history through

³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “East and West,” in *The Bugbear of Literacy* (Bedfont, Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1979), p. 84.

⁴ See Harry Oldmeadow, “Orientalism, Racial Theory and the Allure of Fascism,” in *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), pp. 367–374.

the incarnation of Jesus, through the descent of the Koran, the disclosure of the Vedas and Sutras, through archaic mythologies, or whatever the case may be. In a theistic framework we can understand these Revelations as the Word of God.

So, we have these multiple Revelations, down through the ages, addressed to different human collectivities. Now this is, of course, a very difficult idea for most modern folk, steeped as we are in an anti-traditional worldview. Revelation provides a key to a body of knowledge and truth which is of a different kind, a different degree, from our ordinary empirical, scientific knowledge which we accumulate over the years. We experiment, we theorize, we conjecture, we reason and conceptualize, we have hypotheses, we are convinced we have discovered some truth, only to discover five or ten or fifty years down the track that it is entirely wrong, or at least quite inadequate. This is one of the extraordinary things, one of the great ironies, which many people cannot appreciate. They are so confident that the scientific explanation of life, of death, of the universe, of everything, is right, but when we look back over the history of science, many, many times throughout history people have thought, “Now we have finally discovered how things really are and all of the previous ideas can now be abandoned.” But then we discover that twenty, fifty, a hundred years later, that way of looking at things is out the window.

Let me give you an example. In the late nineteenth century, one of the most popular and intellectually reputable scientific theories was phrenology. Through analyzing skull shapes, it was believed, you could determine the intelligence of a person—counting the nobs on the forehead, measuring the width of the skull, and so on. People took it absolutely seriously; huge amounts of research were done on phrenology; this was the key to understanding the human organism. Where is phrenology now? It is discredited, in the rubbish bin, gone with the wind. The same will happen to all the current theories, quantum physics, Darwinian evolution, whatever it happens to be. That sort of knowledge, those sorts of theories, those models and paradigms come and go, but what we are offered through the Revelations does not come and go, it does not change, it is always there.

Of course, the fact that we are living in a different cultural climate, that we have had different sorts of experiences, means that we cannot approach those Revelations in the way that a mediaeval person would. We have to take account of our cultural condition and what is going on around us, but what we are looking for does not change; it is always there. If you can communicate that idea to a seeker, at least they know where to start looking.

As well as all the Revelations, we have the testimonies of the great saints and sages. Now if we ask ourselves, “Whom are we to trust or believe?” Are we going to believe those people that give us one theory and then another theory which falls over after ten or twenty years, that is soon discredited, or are we to look to those people who have given us an account of reality, an account of life and death, the validity of which does not seem to change? Reading the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu, the Vedic scriptures, the Buddhist sutras or hearing the myths of the American Indians or the Australian Aborigines, we are on a different plane altogether. You might say that in a sense we here escape time.

Tradition offers an antidote and an alternative to the two poles of what Guénon categorizes as “solidification” and “dissolution” in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* [1945], which by the way I think is probably the single most important book written in the twentieth

century. In this context we can say that in the religious domain we see a manifestation of “solidification,” of hardening, or even fossilization, in religious fundamentalism. The opposite tendency, towards diffusion and dissipation, can be seen in various forms of religious “liberalism” where almost anything goes. Then there is the froth and bubble of “New Age spirituality.” The picture is further complicated by the spread of an outlook which is not religious at all, one belligerently antagonistic to religion. We have the likes of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, to whom you allude, peddling a pseudo-scientific critique of religion which is widely accepted. The triumph of all these tendencies over the past few hundred years in science, humanism, rationalism, materialism—all of this has created an environment that is very unsympathetic to religion in any form or mode whether it is fundamentalist or liberal or authentically traditional. So, this is very confusing for a young person who is looking for a spiritual path, a bewildering kind of situation.

One of the compensations of modernity, which in many ways is a horrible mess, one of the gains, is that we have all this literature and testimony available to us in a way that was not true before. People were very much locked into their own cultural situation, but now, with the collision of cultures all around the world, it is all available to us. A lot of material which was previously esoteric, shrouded in a veil of secrecy, is now accessible. Of course, this exposes us to some other dangers. Nevertheless, the point remains for the serious seeker: the resources immediately and easily available to us are quite astonishing. That is one good thing about the modern situation.

SBS: A related question pertains to the phenomenon of *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR), which overlooks that the spiritual dimension is the interior or the heart of every divinely revealed religion. Which cannot be indiscriminately extracted from it without compromising or making it null and void. Some would argue that the rise in interest in nonduality or nondual spirituality is a similar phenomenon. Another way of phrasing this dilemma is the attempt at accessing the esoteric without the exoteric, overlooking that both are needed for the integral understanding and practice of religion. What are your thoughts on this?

HO: The idea of the spiritual without the religious, what does it mean? It means that I am going to work this out for myself; I am going to look to the inner self; I am not going to rely on dogmas, rituals, teachings, and forms of one sort or another. I do not need to go to church, read the scriptures, take the sacraments, be initiated by a guru; I am going to do this on my own. I am going to meditate, to pray, to fast, to go live in a cave, or whatever. I am going to be a spiritual person, and I do not need religion. Now I do not mean to satirize or parody that situation, but this seems to me to be what these people are saying: I can do this on my own, or perhaps with the help of the latest self-styled self-help “guru” who has apparently discovered something unknown to the religious sages. I mean, seriously!

The question then arises: does the human individual as a single person have the subjective resources to discover the Truth without external aids, without a guidebook, without a map? Well, the answer, I think, is both yes and no. Why is it yes? Well, as Schuon says in one of his works, “intellection can occur, as an isolated miracle, wherever the intellectual faculty exists.”⁵ I would adduce Ramana Maharshi [1879–1950] as an example. He was a sixteen-year-old larrikin

⁵ Frithjof Schuon, “The Nature and Arguments of Faith,” in *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 48.

schoolboy knocking about in his village in south India, not particularly good at his studies, not particularly distinguished in any way, a teenager having fun in his village. He suddenly has this death experience, has a mystical experience which turns everything upside-down, inside out, and changes everything. He more or less instantly changes from an ignorant schoolboy into someone who knows the nature of reality—an astonishing thing! This would be an example of an “isolated miracle.” Yes, it can happen, it might happen, it is not impossible. Yet as far as most of us are concerned, this is very unlikely. We can sit and peer into ourselves, meditate, and so on as long as we like, and we are likely to just go around in circles. What we need, as I was intimating before, is a map or a guidebook to help us along the way, to point out various dangers, identify landmarks, advise us on the best way forward. That is what religion provides

To come at the question from a different angle, if we say that the problem with the folk that want spirituality without religion is that they think that their own subjective resources are sufficient to find the Truth, the problem from the other side, which is to say people who are too preoccupied with religion rather than spirituality, is that religion for those people becomes an end in itself, which it is not; religion is a *means* to discover the Spirit. It is possible to become too caught up in, preoccupied by, what I would call religiosity, trapped in the trappings, you might say, rather than using religion as it should be used, as a means to an end, a means to discovering the Spirit, a means to discovering the Truth, a means of finding God. Of course, once you have arrived at that point, well, it does not really matter how you got there.

Within perennialist literature there is the analogy of the *mountain and the summit*. The different religious paths are like paths up a mountain. There are many different ways that you can climb it. Circumambulate the bottom of the mountain and you can start climbing from any point on the base. Some paths might be more direct, some more hazardous, and other paths will be gentler and easier. If you embark on one of those paths, the thing to do is to stay on it. There is no point in climbing five hundred meters and then saying, “Well I have had enough of this path. I am going back down to the bottom. I will try another path.” You spend your whole life walking up this path or that path, and then back down again, but never getting to the top. From the perennialist point of view you choose a path, stay on it, and you keep climbing. Hopefully you will get to the top of the mountain before you die. Maybe you will, maybe you won’t, but you keep climbing. If you get to the top of the mountain, if you meet others there, you do not start arguing about which is the best path. You are happy to be on the top of the mountain; that is all that matters. To use another analogy, the *circumference and the center* of a circle, the spokes of the wheel traveling down the spoke of the wheel towards the middle: it does not matter which spoke you come down as long as you are converging on the Center (Truth/Spirit/God). That is what matters.

SBS: Interfaith dialogue can be beneficial in that it can increase spiritual literacy. Do you perceive any dangers in contemporary interreligious dialogue as some have taken religious pluralism to signify that there is nothing absolute in a given religion and that all exclusive truth claims are somehow relative? How do you view this?

HO: Religious ecumenism or interfaith dialogue is only profitable amongst people who understand the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion: that is to say, people who at the same time understand the necessity of religious orthodoxy, the necessity of traditional forms within a particular religious framework, *and* also understand the limits of religious forms. But an

understanding that religious forms are *relative* should not lead to the conclusion that we just throw them all into the melting pot, that religious forms really do not matter because they are all relative. Aldous Huxley [1894–1963] espouses such a position in *The Perennial Philosophy* [1944], his anthology from the 1940s—in many ways an excellent book, and most of what he says is illuminating and valuable. But the mistake he and many others of that ilk make is that they think that because all the religions converge on a single truth, this means that the religious forms—doctrines, rituals, the scriptures and all the rest—can now be thrown into the rubbish bin. This is fatal. This is a descent into the relativistic anarchy of modern thought. Anything goes there. Ecumenical or interfaith dialogue is only profitable with people who understand what orthodoxy means and why we must preserve it within each tradition, but at the same time they realize that there is a truth that surpasses or transcends those formal differences. Alas, these people are not thick on the ground, but if we can get people of that sort of understanding together, then yes, we can have very fruitful dialogue. But otherwise it ends up as nothing much more than a gesture of good will, which is perhaps worth making, but it will not take us very far. People feel sympathetically disposed and feel like they need to sit down and tell each other about their respective viewpoints. That is fine up to a point. But good will does not of itself show us how to resolve the apparent contradictions between the legitimate claims of different religions. The only way that can be done is through the kind of understanding that Schuon articulates in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* [1948]. If everybody involved in interfaith dialogue would read and understand this book there would no problems. That would be a good way to go.

SBS: You have been very critical of contemporary science, especially the phenomenon of *scientism*. Could you please say more about this issue?

HO: Scientism: what do we mean by this term? We mean an ideology, a worldview, a set of assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values. We must differentiate scientism from science. By the word “science” we mean a method of inquiry that has been accepted amongst scientists for the last five or six hundred years: experimentation, hypothesis and verification, all of that. That is not scientism. Scientism is the *ideology* that has developed along with modern science. If it is an ideology, it is a view of things. The scientistic ideology is based on various fundamental assumptions which most people do not question. They accept the materialistic foundations of science—“materialistic” in the philosophical sense—and its utilitarian applications without examining its underlying assumptions.

One of these assumptions is that we can understand the nature of reality by an empirical investigation of the material world around us. Now Shankara [788–820], the great Hindu sage, put the matter very clearly. He said the world of *māyā*—that is to say the world of time and space, the world we are living in, the world of forms, of change and all of the physical processes and properties which govern the material world, the domain of science—the world of *māyā* is *not inexplicable*—we can understand it—but it is *not self-explanatory*. The world of time and space is a tissue of relativities which cannot be understood by any purely physical (temporal and material) inquiry. Trying to understand reality through what we would call scientific investigation is like trying to understand the difference between day and night without reference to the sun. So, what is the sun? The sun is knowledge of a reality that is beyond time and space, but which also pervades time and space—in other words a divine Reality which is both transcendent and immanent. If we take Shankara’s dictum seriously, what it really means is that the whole of modern science is

engaged in what is essentially a futile exercise, because it is trying to achieve something which is not possible, a total understanding of reality through an empirical method.⁶

Of course, I am not saying that science has no point, no purpose, that it is entirely useless and wrong. That would be a ridiculous position to take. What I *am* saying is that we cannot get to the bottom of certain questions through a scientific mentality and method. Now, scientism seems to think that it can explain more or less anything and everything—give us enough time, enough money, enough research; we will work it all out. What do we need to know to understand what the human being is? Oh well, the Genome Project (for example). By the time we finish this, we will understand what the human being is all about. From another point of view, from a traditional point of view, no amount of “genome projects,” no amount of this, that, or the other science will tell us what a human being is. Scientific investigation could not possibly exhaust that question; it might be able to provide glimmers of a partial answer, but a full answer to that question it can never provide.

Another example: the cognitive neuroscientists and so on who think we can explain everything by tracking what is going on in the brain. They conducted experiments where they assembled some Buddhist monks and put all sorts of gadgets on their heads. They said, “Okay fellas, go to it, get into your meditation.” The monks all sat there in meditation, and the scientists peer into their computer screens, and after this is all over, they say, “Ah, well, look at this! Lots of alpha waves! That is what meditation is all about. That is what is happening. It is all a matter of alpha waves.” Well, it may or may not be true that meditation produces more alpha waves. But does it explain what meditation is? Does it explain what the experience of mediation is all about? No, it tells us pretty much nothing, perhaps a little something of peripheral interest, but it has nothing essential to say on the subject. An example of a reductionism which is rampant in modern “science.”

Underlying scientism, as I referred to earlier, is progressivism, the idea that we know more and more as time goes by; we know all sorts of things that the benighted people of the past did not know. There is a progressivist or evolutionist assumption lurking about behind much modern science.⁷ Gai Eaton [1921–2010] said in one of his books that we know more and more about less and less, and that “Our ignorance of the few things that matter is as prodigious as our knowledge of trivialities.”⁸ In other words, we know more about the material world but less about the spiritual reality, those things that really matter.

From this point of view let us take an aboriginal elder from five hundred years ago and compare him with a professor of nuclear physics at Harvard. And we ask which of these two is more knowledgeable? Well, if we take the modern view, the scientific view, of course the Harvard professor, because he or she knows all sorts of things about which the aboriginal elder knows nothing. The elder does not know about the third principle of thermodynamics or computers, or rockets on the moon; he is completely ignorant of these things. But if we take a spiritual point of view, and ask which of these two people understands what being a human being really is, which

⁶ See Harry Oldmeadow, “Śāṅkara’s Doctrine of *Māyā*,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1992), pp. 131–146.

⁷ See Harry Oldmeadow, “The False Prophets of Modernity: Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche,” in *Touchstones of the Spirit: Essays on Religion, Tradition and Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2012), pp. 105–128.

⁸ Gai Eaton, “Two Traditionalists,” in *The Richest Vein: Eastern Tradition and Modern Thought* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2005), p. 206.

of these two people really understands what life is, what death is, we are going to be much less confident about our answer. Well actually, I would be much more confident that it would be the aboriginal elder. The aboriginal elder does not have a mind full of all of the trivialities, the impedimenta, the endless data that we are bombarded with, crammed into our minds, coming from all directions, from the internet, television screens, mobile phones, advertising, and so on. Victims of what Theodore Roszak [1933–2011] called “the cult of information.”⁹ Are we getting wiser? Well, I do not think so. In our rush to accumulate this comparatively trivial information we have lost sight of the things that really matter. This would be another instance of where scientism as a worldview gives us a false picture.

The last point, on this general theme of scientism. The defenders of modern science, people like Dawkins, are very quick to identify the benefits of modern science. They say, “Well look, it has brought us all of these good things; we have longer lives, we have surgery, medicines, drugs, gadgets, all sorts of things.” There are two answers to this. One is that yes, of course modern science has brought us some benefits—it would be silly to argue otherwise—but a lot of the things which are presented as benefits on closer investigation turn out, at the very least, to be rather more ambiguous, or even worse, than they seemed at first. Take for example the question of modern medicine and drugs; on the face of it, yes, it seems like a very good thing, but as a lot of people are now aware, it may well be that these drugs and medicines in the long term actually do more harm than good. There is more and more evidence to suggest that this is so. So, what looked like a good thing in the first place, in the longer view turns out to be not such a good thing after all. Furthermore these “advances” are often remedies for problems caused by the applications of science in the first place—“industrial diseases” like mesothelioma, for instance. The second point is that our conclusions depend on the kind of question we ask. Consider the issue of longevity of life. The right question surely is not how long we are living, but what kind of life we are living, a question about *quality* rather than *quantity*. Then the matter appears in a different light.

We could talk about science and scientism forever, but these are some general reflections. Science should be a humble servant rather than a tyrannical master. Science has its place, and a lot of good can come from it, but only if serves our proper human ends, only if it does not assume a totalitarian control of the way we think about things. The fact of the matter is that for a lot of people science has assumed the role of a tyrannical master; if the fellows in white coats say something is the case, then that it is the end of the matter. Well, no, it is not the end of the matter; let us investigate further and let us look at it from other points of view.

SBS: Climate change, or the environmental crisis, continues to gain international recognition, yet most discussions neglect its central causes and the myriad and intersecting crises of the contemporary world, especially their root cause—the spiritual crisis of the contemporary human being. It appears that climate change is a symptom of a much greater illness. What are your thoughts on this?

HO: This question bears on what we have been discussing, scientism. Many people accept that we face a crisis and ask what is to be done. The general answer is that we are going to do more research, put more scientists on the job, spend more money on it; we are going to come up with various material or mechanical solutions to this problem, whether it is planting more trees or

⁹ See Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information* (London, UK: Paladin, 1986).

whatever. Now, as you say, this is failing to recognize the fundamental problem or cause. Well, what is the fundamental problem? Professor Nasr put it in terms of a scission “between heaven and earth.”¹⁰ So, the environmental crisis is a symptom of a break or rupture between heaven and earth. Until the relationship between heaven and earth is repaired, we have no chance of fixing this environmental crisis. What does he mean by this? He is referring to the relationship between the Divine, the unseen reality, and this material world of time and space. In theistic terms what is awry is the relationship between Man and God (I put “Man” first to signify that it is from thence that the rupture has been initiated; the disorder comes from us, not from God).

Speaking about Shankara, we said that the greater reality is both transcendent and immanent. The first step is to recognize the presence of the Divine within the world of nature, its immanence within the natural order. (I prefer the term “natural order” to “environment,” which has a cold and metallic ring.) Now, if the Divine is present in the natural order, what is our proper relationship or attitude to it? Well, our appropriate stance is our attitude to the Divine in general, however we conceptualize it, whether it is in terms of a deity or whatever; that is to say one of *reverence*. The natural order in the first place should be treated with reverence, with that *sense of the sacred* which was, we might say, the existential signature of primordial peoples. How is it treated? It is treated as a quarry, as an endless supply of raw materials, as a garbage dump. We do whatever we like with it, especially if there is money to be made. We dig things out of the ground, tear down forests, throw our rubbish in the sea, exterminate species, all of those things we have been doing since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. These are not signs of respect or reverence but of disrespect, contempt, rapacious exploitation, and domination.

If we had this more reverential attitude to the natural order and we could see it as the primordial peoples and the nomads see it, as a sacred “text,” as a divinely created teaching, our relationship would be so much healthier. Again, to consider further the question about the proper attitude to the Divine and to the Divine-in-Nature? Well, to start with, it is expressed through ritual. All of the different traditions practice various rituals through which we can purify ourselves, order our lives, get our priorities right. We should have a ritual relationship with the natural order. Quite what form that could take for disillusioned people with a materialistic outlook is difficult to envisage. But you see what I am getting at. We need to get the relationship, if that is the right word, between ourselves and the natural order onto an entirely different footing in which reverence, respect, ritual, the discerning of a divine message in the natural order, in which these things are foregrounded. Now, I am not saying that we expel the scientists or that we do not carry on with environmental research of one sort or another; I am not saying dispense with all of that. All of that can go on, but within a different framework, a different context. That framework cannot be supplied by science or, I am afraid, by any other ideology of modernity, even those that seem to be most sympathetic and pertinent to the cause, like “eco-philosophy” or “eco-psychology.” As much as one endorses the end in view or recognizes admirable motivations, the philosophical framework that most ecologists are working within is part of the problem, not the solution. What we end up with amongst environmentalists who have some understanding of the problem is often a warmed-over pantheism of a sentimental kind. That is not going to get us very far either.

¹⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Intellectual and Historical Causes,” in *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 64.

As you know, one of the most profound commentators on this subject is Professor Nasr, especially in his landmark work, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* [1968]. It is every bit as relevant, as pertinent, today as it was fifty years ago. He has written a lot about this subject since then. There are various other people, like Wendell Berry [b. 1934], who have many insightful things to say about the so-called environmental crisis.

SBS: Could you please speak about the relevance of religion of the First Peoples and their shamanic traditions, as you have written a very important book on Black Elk or Hehaka Sapa (1863–1950), the Lakota holy man?¹¹

HO: Recall the modern belief in progress and evolution, the assumption that we become more knowledgeable, we understand ourselves and the world better as we go along. I am rather inclined to agree with Guénon and the Hindus on this question, which is to say that that things are not improving; they are declining, they are degenerating. We are living in what the Hindus call the *Kali-Yuga* [“dark age”], the Iron Age. From this point of view, the primordial peoples, which is to say, the non-literate peoples, the nomadic peoples, are closer to the origin than we are. Under this view, the origin is perfection and truth and we gradually move away from that. In my understanding of things, those people have a big advantage over us.

If I could take the question of literacy. This is really quite important. Coomaraswamy came up with a beautiful metaphor for this; he said literacy is like a wooden leg. Now, if someone has been unfortunate enough to lose his or her leg through some terrible accident, then a wooden leg is very useful, you are very glad to have it, it helps you get about, you are more mobile than you were without the wooden leg. However, if you never lost your leg and you have two legs, then a wooden leg is of no use to you whatever. You have no need of a wooden leg and you can dispense with it or you can put it on your wall as an ornament or whatever, but it has no functional purpose. Now, literacy is like the wooden leg.¹² In the modern world do we want to be literate? Yes, of course we want to be literate because we have lost a leg; we are severely disadvantaged if we are not literate. If we cannot read and write, it is a problem and, in these circumstances, we want everyone to read and write. So, we are in favor of literacy programs and all of that. But the nomadic peoples all over the world—it does not matter if we are talking about the Bedouin, Kalahari Bushmen, Inuit people, Native Americans, the Australian Aboriginals—these nomadic non-literate peoples did not need literacy; literacy had nothing to add to their culture, to their way of being, to their understanding of the world. In fact, we could say that literacy considered in the larger view is a kind of impediment because it puts a barrier between us and what is “out there” (macrocosm) and what is “in here” (microcosm). The written or printed word becomes a kind of a screen, a filter, a mediator. Thus, literacy means a *diminution* of awareness, so that non-literacy is far from being a deprivation. There is something precious about non-literacy and about non-literate cultures that we have lost, not least the mythopoeic sensibility which deals with life and with the world much more directly.

¹¹ See Harry Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary: The Oglala Holy Man and Sioux Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2018).

¹² See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Bugbear of Literacy,” in *The Bugbear of Literacy* (Bedfont, Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1979), pp. 33–49.

So, we must reach for an understanding of these cultures, as best we can in difficult circumstances where most of this has disappeared or has been hopelessly fragmented or just steamrolled by the juggernaut of modernity. Only so much is possible with what is left. But perhaps we can learn something about that way of being in the world and that way of understanding ourselves, free of the contaminations of scientism and the other disabling ideologies of modernity. It is like getting back to a pure mountain stream after we have been drinking sludge or polluted water; in these nomadic traditions we can find spring water clean and pure. But of course, I do not want fall into the trap of over-romanticizing and idealizing these traditions and societies.

People say, “Ah, yes, they had this abuse, that abuse, they did this, they killed people, they had a bad attitude to whales.” *Of course* there were abuses. There are abuses in all human societies. That is the nature of humankind; we are imperfect beings living in an imperfect world. Wherever you turn in history, whatever culture, whatever time, whatever place, you will find abuses. The question is in which social order are the abuses minimized, in which is the evil minimized and the good maximized? That is the crucial question. As Schuon said, “It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.”¹³ When we consider these different cultures and civilizations, the question really boils down to this: which is most congenial to our spiritual welfare? Where and how is that best looked after? In my view it is in the primordial nomadic cultures that the essential nature of man was most fully recognized. Whatever else might be wrong with those societies and cultures—and there were plenty of things that were wrong—whatever else may be said, they had a firm understanding of the dignity, responsibility, and vocation of the human being which we have largely lost. It has been occluded, confused, perverted, camouflaged, mystified, covered up, and disrespected. Of course, we can never lose it altogether or we would simply vanish from the face of the earth.

If in studying these cultures, and where possible, meeting such people, such encounters can bring us closer to their way of understanding things, then this is all to the good. But, as I have already intimated, this is not the view that most people take in the contemporary world. Most people seem to think, “Well, they were backward people, they were Stone Age people. We were like that ten or fifty thousand years ago. What could we possibly learn from those people? They need to be like us, they need to learn from us.” That is getting things upside-down and inside-out. It is we who need to learn from them. As far as the most important questions are concerned, they have a great deal to teach us. This is one of the things I hoped to show in my book on Black Elk.

The fate of the nomadic peoples in the modern world is one of the most poignant and tragic developments in human history, so often brushed aside as if it is of no particular importance. In America this is found in the fate of the Native Americans or elsewhere, and more recently, in the fate of the Tibetans. The destruction of such cultures, as Marco Pallis [1895–1990] writes, is of “cosmic significance.”¹⁴ It is not a momentary historical phenomenon that we can forget about down the track; it is a cosmic desecration because such peoples and such cultures represent certain human and spiritual possibilities which are being obliterated by modernity, “progress,” science, industry, and all those sorts of things. This is a very dark development.

¹³ Frithjof Schuon, “In the Wake of the Fall,” in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1984), p. 42.

¹⁴ Marco Pallis, “Book Review—The New Religions,” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 1971), p. 189.

So too the disappearance of languages. Amongst environmentalists there is a lot of concern and upset because the orange-bellied parrot, for instance, is endangered. People get very het-up, and rightly so. But on the human plane all of these languages, all these cultures, all these cosmologies disappearing, extirpated, where is the outrage about that? Surely this is at least as significant. The human and cultural landscape is becoming homogenized, materialized, “globalized,” all part of that process that Guénon was talking about. From a spiritual point of view, this homogenized and artificial landscape, this global culture, is more and more arrogant and barbaric. This is the cause for the gravest concern.

SBS: The doctrine of cyclical time and ages is known in the Hindu tradition and found across the diverse religious traditions. Could you please elaborate as to how we can understand the final and current age of the *Kali-Yuga* or “dark age” and what function it holds for contemporary seekers? We cannot lose hope and need to avoid falling into the trappings of nihilism or the catastrophizing tendencies of the mind.

HO: Do I think we are living in the *Kali-Yuga*? Absolutely I do. Do I think that our ultimate destiny is determined by various cosmic cycles? Yes, certainly I do. Do I agree with Guénon’s depiction of our situation in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* insofar as he talks about cosmic cycles? Yes, I agree. Now, if one takes this view, then it has an influence on everything one is thinking about time, about history and where we might be going and what the appropriate response is. So, is it imperative to understand these things. However, if I can refer to a comment that Professor Nasr has made about traditionalists: there are far too many “Kali Yuga experts.”¹⁵ Now, what did he mean by that? I think that he meant that there are too many people worrying about the question as to precisely when and how the cycle is going to come to an end. We know that it will come to an end; I think we can say that, but we do *not* know how or when. As far as our spiritual life is concerned, does it matter whether the cycle ends in one day, one year, a hundred or a thousand years? No, it does not matter. The thing to do is to carry on with our lives, carry on travelling the path as best we can in these circumstances, without deluding ourselves with certain pseudo-mythologies (as Guénon would call them) about progress and future utopias and other dangerous fantasies. We should not surrender to that type of sentimentality. We know that things are going to come to an end. But as far as our day-to-day existence goes, best not to become too preoccupied with the details which we do not know, cannot know, and which do not matter. Yes, we need to understand these things in a general way; it gives us a context for thinking about all sorts of questions and issues. But in the end, it does not really matter how the thing works itself out. What matters is what we are doing in our daily life, day by day. That is what always matters.

SBS: Can you please explain why modernism, and by extension postmodernism, is so problematic and antithetical to the sacred? Some have tried to establish an integrative framework that embraces the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern with spirituality. Is this possible and what are your thoughts on this?

HO: Look, I am afraid I take almost an entirely negative view of modernity in general and of postmodernity in particular. I do not think that they have a great deal to offer. Why not? Because I take Guénon’s view that modernity—or modernism if you prefer to signify a kind of ideology or

¹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Recovery of the Sacred: Tradition and Perennialism in the Contemporary World,” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 19 (Summer 2007), p. 28.

philosophy, an “ism”—modernism is essentially a denial of Tradition; it is a disavowal of Tradition. The driving character or motor force of modernity is negative; it is a repudiation of everything that is meant by Tradition. Of course, if we look over the landscape of modern thought, I am not saying that all modern thinkers are totally negative, but I do think that the primary impulse of modern thought is negative and destructive. (The great English visionary, William Blake [1757–1827], understood this very clearly.) This is very apparent when we look at postmodernism. So, what is postmodernism? Well, there are any number of ways we could characterize it, but the *sine qua non* of postmodernism is *relativism*: everything is relative, everything is conditioned in time and space, everything belongs to a cultural context, it is all a matter of discourses, of power. So we have it in the thought of Foucault [1926–1984], Derrida [1930–2004], and the other Parisian oracles, the “monks of negation,” as someone has called them.

Where does all this come from? Well, to cut a very long story short and to make things as simple as possible, it comes from the kind of thinking exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche [1844–1900]. Nietzsche is a key figure here. Now, Nietzsche was a very clever chap, no doubt, as are a lot of these postmodernist intellectuals, theorists, cultural critics. They can construct all sorts of elaborate theories; they can present quite dazzling insights of a very localized kind. When we enquire into it, at the bottom, I think Guénon’s claim remains valid: at the bottom of it all is negation. It is not an affirmation of something new and wonderful that might take us in a new direction, that might open up new possibilities, that might bring us a new richness of experience or whatever. No, at bottom it is a rejection of everything that Tradition offers.

I do not myself see any point in being conciliatory or open-minded or sympathetically disposed to postmodernist thinking. I think it is misguided, misguided at best, at worst very destructive. Take, for instance, Ken Wilber [b. 1949]. He is a formidable character who has some arresting ideas. I am not wanting to dismiss Ken Wilber with a wave of the hand, but I do think that he has gone in the wrong direction, he has gone off on a sidetrack, on a detour, and it would be much better for him to get back on the main road.

From my point of view, there is something tremendously impertinent about postmodernist thinking; there is a lack of any sense of proportion. It is as if we were to say, “Well look, Jesus had a pretty good idea, he kind of knew what it was about, his teachings are good, but I think we should add this and this. The Buddha he was a wise fellow too, but there were things that he did not understand, and it would be better if we added this to his teachings.” This betrays a sense of gross disproportion. This is confusing different planes. To imagine or refer to the Buddha and Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris in the same breath is ridiculous, altogether absurd. It shows that people do not know what they are dealing with. The idea that we can improve on the Revelations and on the testimony of the saints and sages such as Shankara, Lao Tzu, Ibn ‘Arabi [1165–1240], or whoever the case may be, no, I do not think we can. A much more productive disposition is to have the humility, which is so conspicuously absent in postmodernism, the humility to be receptive to the past and to the great teachings. We do not need to be adding to them, to be modifying them, to show that we are cleverer than the people of the past. What we *do* need to learn concerns this permanent truth, this timeless truth, this truth that does not change. Who knows about it? In short, the great religious founders and the saints and sages of the ages. We start from the position not that we understand more than they did, but that they have something to teach us, things which we have forgotten or which we never knew, things which are always and everywhere true.

There is a corrosive cynicism about postmodernist theorizing, a skepticism about everything that lies outside their ambit, and an attitude to the past which is, at best, condescending. Not much good can come from it. To go back to your general question, do modernism and postmodernism have anything to add for the spiritual seeker? No doubt people will say that I am dogmatic and intolerant. I understand that. But my answer is an emphatic no. People say that one should compromise. “You should meet us in the middle.” If I say, “Two and two equals four” and you say, “Two and two equals five,” am I to reply, “Yes, OK, let’s compromise and agree that two plus two equals four and a half”? Two and two does *not* equal four and a half. Two and two does *not* equal five. It equals four! There is no point in being “open-minded” and conciliatory, compromising with error; if the point of view or idea is wrong, it is wrong. I understand that I must also accept that I might be mistaken. I do not insist that I am right about everything. I must allow for the possibility of my own ignorance and confusion. But when I clearly understand this to be true and that to be false, that two plus two equals four and not five, then I need to say so. That will upset some people; well, I am sorry but that’s how it is.

SBS: Over the past few decades psychedelics have made a powerful resurgence in medical research, providing highly promising results in the clinical treatment of anxiety, depression, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorders, among other conditions. Although the use of psychedelics has demonstrated that they can assist with managing or remedying these mental health and/or substance use issues are there any spiritual dangers that are not being addressed or looked at?

HO: I take the view, both on the basis of my personal experience and on the basis of the literature and research, that the attitude of most modern Western societies towards drugs is ludicrous, repressive, coercive and misguided, and an enormous waste of time, money, and resources. I do not have a negative view of drugs *per se*. As you have just intimated, there are all sorts of benefits that might come from certain natural drugs. For example, it is becoming much more evident that marijuana has all sorts of therapeutic effects and that it can help with pain and insomnia; I am in favor of such usage.

I am also aware of the fact that hallucinogenic drugs or psychedelics can be helpful in shaking up one’s view or understanding of things, breaking down certain psychological inhibitions, and so on. One of the most famous examples of this is the “Good Friday Experiment,”¹⁶ under the supervision of Timothy Leary [1920–1996] and Richard Alpert (who later became known as Ram Dass [1931–2019]). Huston Smith [1919–2016] was one of the participants in the experiment. I am aware of all of that. There are also those medical and therapeutic uses of psychedelics to which you refer.

A psychedelic drug can produce a kind of psychic destabilization which can be very liberating, but it can also be very destructive. And many extravagant claims have been made about the possibilities of drug-induced experiences, most notably perhaps by Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception* [1954]. But are such experiences akin to the mystical experience? Are they of the same order as the Buddha’s Illumination under the Bodhi Tree? Or the experience of St. John of the Cross [1542–1591]? There are many reasons why not but, to be brief, because the psychic

¹⁶ See Walter N. Pahnke, “Drugs and Mysticism,” *International Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring 1966), pp. 295–313; Rick Doblin, “Pahnke’s ‘Good Friday Experiment’: A Long-Term Follow-Up and Methodological Critique,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1991), pp. 1–28.

experience *in itself* is not transformative. That is to say, I am Harry Oldmeadow, I go on an LSD [lysergic acid diethylamide] trip, I have a wonderful time, see all sorts of amazing things. I come out the other side of the trip and I have been shaken about; things are a little bit different from what they were before, but I am still more or less the same Harry Oldmeadow that went into that trip except that I have had one more experience: I have had psychedelic trip. That is not spiritual transformation. That is a disturbance in the psyche, pleasant or not as the case may be, and which may or may not be beneficial. A mystical experience, a deeply spiritual experience, on the other hand, transforms the person, something fundamentally changes, and one is never the same person again. The transformation may be this deep or that deep, a matter of degree, but there is some sort of radical transformation, *metanoia*. I do not think that this happens with psychedelic experiences, or if it does, it is very rare. As far as attempting to integrate psychedelics into spiritual practice is concerned, I think this is dangerous and most likely to be quite counter-productive.

There is another important point to be made here about the spiritual possibilities of drug use. A great deal depends on context. So, if we are talking about Amazonian Indians using various psychedelic drugs, we must refer to a ritualized and religious context, and to the guidance of a shaman who has experienced various things, particularly a kind of death experience. The drug experience has taken place within a highly structured religious context. As far as modern drug taking is concerned, what is the context? A dirty apartment in the middle of the city, with heavy-metal music blaring, people coming and going, with drunks fighting in the street? What kind of context is that? Or perhaps even worse, you are in a laboratory where someone is doing an experiment, people with white coats are peering at you while you are undergoing this experience. The context is absolutely crucial. Generally speaking, that is what is missing in the modern environment. I am not one to recommend blasting yourself with psychedelics, to claim that you will see “the white light,” that you will understand the nature of reality. You *might* understand more than you did before. But is it spiritual transformation? I do not think so, or only very rarely. More likely an involvement with psychedelics will lead you off the spiritual path into some treacherous detour or *cul-de-sac*.¹⁷

SBS: Contemporary psychology has for countless individuals replaced the role of religion and spirituality in the modern and postmodern world and has become itself akin to a secular pseudo-religion. Could you please weigh in on this matter?

HO: If one’s egoic state, that is to say our normal consciousness as an individual, if that is in a state of complete disarray, fraught with neurosis, complexes, anxieties, pathologies, and so forth, it is very unlikely that we are going to be able to derive much benefit from reading St. Teresa of Ávila [1515–1582]. Before that can happen, we may need some help along the way. Can a therapist provide such help? Of course. I do not want to dismiss therapy, not at all. (To digress for a moment, one of my students was amazed to learn that my wife is a psychologist. This student had heard me delivering diatribes against modern psychology and she said, “Is it true that your wife is a psychologist?” “Yes,” I said. She responded, “How does that work?”) To get back to the question, psychotherapies can be very helpful in clearing away some of the debris and dealing with some of the immediate confusion and distress, but as you say, in some quarters psychology has been

¹⁷ See Mark Perry, “The Forbidden Door,” in *The Mystery of Individuality: Grandeur and Delusion of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2012), pp. 245–271.

elevated to a position which properly belongs to religion, and when that happens we can easily find ourselves in trouble.

Another thing about psychology: I am referring again back to Guénon although I think his view of psychology is rather harsh, but it was he who said, rather neatly, “[N]ineteenth century materialism closed the mind of man to what is above him, twentieth century psychology opened it to what is below him.”¹⁸ I think one of the dangers in any kind of therapy is that we become obsessed, understandably perhaps, with the negative or dark contents of the psyche and in doing so we can inadvertently stir up various things from the subconscious which are best left alone. The whole territory is very hazardous; the whole domain of the psyche is perilous. I certainly do not claim to be any sort of expert at all. I would want to be very cautious in any general remarks. My personal belief is that psychotherapy has got its place, certainly, but it also has its dangers. Therapists should recognize the limited competence of their own discipline or field, and they should be aware of the boundless domain of the Spirit which is beyond their reach. If that is the case, then I have no problem.

In the situation in which we find ourselves there are all sorts of people who are not going to turn to religion, it is not part of their framework, it is the last place that they are likely to turn. They are presenting with a problem, they say that they cannot sleep, they cannot stop drinking, they are physically harming their partner. There is no use in saying to those people, “Religion has the answer, start going to church”; most often that is not going to happen. We want to do something for such people who urgently need some relief, some remedy. It is not an ideal situation, it is not an ideal world, but in the confused, pluralistic, crazy society that we are living in, any help that we can offer people, or receive for ourselves for that matter, is a good thing. No matter how inadequate it is in the overall scheme of things. Let us make some progress with the immediate problem and perhaps that will open the way to go on to a deeper understanding.

It might be worth saying in the context of our discussion of psychology that the tendency to reduce religion to psychology as is exemplified by the reduction of Buddhism to a psychology is reprehensible. It is understandable, but reprehensible nevertheless. Buddhism is not a psychology; Buddhism is a religion. Now, of course it is intensely psychological in the sense that it is concerned with our immediate psychological situation and experience. Its *modus operandi* is psychological if you like, but it is not a psychology; it is a religion. Trying to turn it into a psychology is to flatten it out and to reduce it to something less than it actually is. The same thing is going on with people who say that “Buddhism is not a religion; it is a philosophy. It’s just a view of life, a rational way of understanding life, or a way of life.” But above all else Buddhism is a religion. That is to say, it addresses a reality that is beyond time and space, is beyond our immediate experience, beyond the psyche, a spiritual reality, a timeless and immutable Reality. And it provides the means whereby we can conform ourselves to that Reality. Buddhism is rooted in that Reality. The Buddha, of course, does not want to say too much about it, and he works largely in his teachings through negation—*neti neti*—“not this, not that.” To reduce Buddhism either to a rational humanistic philosophy or to reduce it to a psychology is to do it tremendous violence. There are many well-intentioned people running around who think they are preserving Buddhism for the modern world, adapting it for a modern audience, making it “relevant,” but what they are really doing is turning

¹⁸ René Guénon, quoted in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Doctrine,” in *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 61.

Buddhism into yet another ideology or into yet another therapy, thereby destroying it as a religion. An example of this is the contemporary popularization of a quasi-Buddhist “mindfulness” quite outside any religious context.

SBS: In closing, is there any parting advice that would you give spiritual seekers in today’s perplexing context?

HO: My work has primarily been scholarly. I read and study and write, produce books, go to conferences, give lectures, participate in seminars, teach. My vocation has been as an academic teacher, *not* as a spiritual teacher or guide. I do not want to overestimate myself or trespass beyond my proper limits in dispensing advice, and I am always very cautious in doing so. I am not qualified to give spiritual advice. I am also wary of giving simple answers to complex problems. I often remind myself of these wise words from Huston Smith: “Our lives are wrapped in mystery, and a lifetime is hardly sufficient to begin to fathom it.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, I am prepared to dispense a little bit of general advice.

If (a big if) all of these things that we have been saying about Tradition are true, then the urgent thing for a seeker in the world today is to find a point of access, to find some way into the world of tradition, into what Whitall N. Perry [1920–2005] signaled in the title of his magnificent compendium, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* [1971]. How can I find access to this? The short answer: through one of the religious traditions. It does not really matter in the end which tradition as long as it is an integral tradition; we are talking about the obvious ones: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on. Nothing of a modern origin, nothing that has popped up in the last five minutes. We are not interested in the New Age movement and things that purport to be based on new dispensations. It is very simple, as Guénon and Schuon made clear: the descent of the Koran is the last of great religious Revelations; anything after that needs to be treated with skepticism and caution.

Find your tradition. That may not be easy, it might involve some trial and error, some looking around. But for most people, it should be the tradition into which they were born, the tradition of their own culture. As soon as you move out of that context and go elsewhere, you have all sorts of problems which do not otherwise arise. If you can participate in your own religious tradition, that is best. For most people in the West this means the Christian tradition. Of course, there are serious problems; institutional Christianity is in such disarray and people are disenchanted for good reasons. I understand that.

Choose a tradition and follow the path as best as you can. There are obvious things that all believers or practitioners in each tradition are enjoined to do, whether it is worship, prayer, devotions, pilgrimage, other rituals, meditation, invocations, whatever the case may be. Follow the outward forms, do not neglect the outward forms or think that you are above them; none of us are above the outward forms. Shankara was one of the greatest sages; if he did not know the nature of reality, nobody did. Shankara still said his prayers, he did not think that he was above saying his prayers; he did so daily. So, you follow the outward forms, but you also read the Scriptures and the mystical literature, the testimonies of the saints and sages from within your tradition and from elsewhere,

¹⁹ Huston Smith, “Prologue,” to Huston Smith with Jeffery Paine, *Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine, an Autobiography* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), p. xx.

and hopefully you read some of the perennialist authors—Guénon, Schuon, Burckhardt, Martin Lings [1909–2005], Marco Pallis, Whitall N. Perry, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and many others. You read these things, you expose yourself to them, you meet such people if you can, and on the negative side, you treat everything about modernism with caution, with some skepticism, you do not simply believe everything that you read in the newspaper or see on the internet, you do not believe everything that Richard Dawkins tells you, you do not have unlimited faith in the people in white coats. Choose a path, observe the forms, be skeptical about modernity, go to the best—the saints and sages. This is my advice in a nutshell. I hope it might be helpful.

SBS: Thank you so much for spending this time with me to discuss and explore many important themes that impact serious seekers today.