

A Sage for the Times

The Role and the *Oeuvre* of Frithjof Schuon

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If Guénon was the master expositor of metaphysical doctrines and Coomaraswamy the peerless scholar and connoisseur of Oriental art who began his exposition of metaphysics through recourse to the language of artistic forms, Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr¹

Schuon & his Precursors, René Guénon and AK Coomaraswamy

René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon have played different but complementary roles in reaffirming the perennial philosophy, each fulfilling a function corresponding to their distinct sensibilities and gifts. Guénon occupies a special position by virtue of being the first to articulate the fundamental metaphysical and cosmological principles through which the *sophia perennis* might be rediscovered and expressed anew in the West. Schuon recognized Guénon as a "providential interpreter, at least on the doctrinal level" for the

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred Crossroad*, New York, 1981, p.107.

modern West.² In a like sense, Jean-Pierre Laurant refers to Guénon's "hieratic role".³ Guénon's critique of the "reign of quantity" also provides the platform from which more detailed criticisms might be made by later traditionalists. His reaction to modernism was integral to his role and constitutes a kind of clearing of the ground, enabling us to understand

some of the darkest enigmas of the modern world, enigmas which the world itself denies because it is incapable of perceiving them although it carries them within itself, and because this denial is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of the special mentality whereby it exists.⁴

Guénon was a prolific writer. He published seventeen books during his lifetime, and at least eight posthumous collections and compilations have since appeared. The *oeuvre* exhibits certain recurrent motifs and preoccupations and is, in a sense, all of a piece. Guénon's understanding of tradition is the key to his work. As early as 1909 we find Guénon writing of "...the Primordial Tradition which, in reality, is the same everywhere, regardless of the different shapes it takes in order to be fit for every race and every historical period."⁵ As the English traditionalist, Gai Eaton, has observed, Guénon

believes that there exists a Universal Tradition, revealed to humanity at the beginning of the present cycle of time, but partially lost... his primary concern is less with the detailed forms of this Tradition and the history of its decline than

2 Frithjof Schuon, "L'Oeuvre", quoted by Whitall Perry in "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth and History", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 12:3, p.160

3 Jean-Pierre Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* CLXXIX: i, 1971, p.63.

4 René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* Penguin, Baltimore, 1972, p.11.

5 René Guénon, "La Demiurge", *La Gnose* 1909, quoted in Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom" in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* privately published, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, p.351.

with its kernel, the pure and changeless knowledge which is still accessible to man through the channels provided by traditional doctrine...⁶

The existence of a Primordial Tradition embodying a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles from which derive a succession of traditions each expressing these principles in forms determined by a given Revelation and by the exigencies of the particular situation, is axiomatic in Guénon's work.⁷ It is a first principle which admits of no argument; nor does it require any kind of "proof" or "demonstration", historical or otherwise.

Guénon's work, from his earliest writings in 1909 onwards, can be seen as an attempt to give a new expression and application to the timeless principles which inform all traditional doctrines. In his writings he ranges over a vast terrain—Vedanta, the Chinese tradition, Christianity, Sufism, folklore and mythology from all over the world, the secret traditions of gnosticism, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and so on, always intent on excavating their underlying principles and showing them to be formal manifestations of the one Primordial Tradition. Certain key themes run through all of his writings and one meets again and again with such notions as these: the concept of metaphysics transcending all other doctrinal orders; the identification of metaphysics and the "formalisation", so to speak, of gnosis (or *jñāna* if one prefers); the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains; the hierarchic superiority and infallibility of intellectual knowledge; the contrast of the modern Occident with the traditional Orient; the spiritual bankruptcy of modern European civilisation; a cyclical view of Time, based largely on the Hindu doctrine of cosmic cycles; a contra-evolutionary view of history.

6 Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* Faber & Faber, London, 1949, pp.188-189.

7 The relationship between the Primordial Tradition and the various traditions needs clarification in that while each tradition in fact derives its overall form and principal characteristics from a particular Revelation, it nevertheless carries over (in many of its aspects) certain essential features of the tradition which precedes it.

Guénon gathered together doctrines and principles from diverse times and places but emphasized that the enterprise was a synthetic one which envisaged formally divergent elements in their principal unity rather than a syncretic one which press-ganged incongruous forms into an artificial amalgam. This distinction is a crucial one not only in Guénon's work but in traditionalism as a whole.⁸

Guénon repeatedly turned to oriental wisdoms, believing that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It is important not to confuse this Eastward-looking stance with the kind of sentimental exoticism nowadays so much in vogue. As Coomaraswamy noted,

If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If "Eastern" metaphysics differed from a "Western" metaphysics—one or the other would not be metaphysics.⁹

One of Guénon's translators made the same point in suggesting that if Guénon turns so often to the East it is because the West is in the position of the

foolish virgins who, through the wandering of their attention in other directions, had allowed their lamps to go out; in order to rekindle the sacred fire, which in its essence is always the same wherever it may be burning, they must have recourse to the lamps still kept alight.¹⁰

The contrast between the riches of traditional civilisations and the spiritual impoverishment of modern Europe sounds like a refrain through Guénon's writings. In all his work

8 See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* Luzac, London, 1958, pp.x-xi and René Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World* Luzac, London, 1945, p.9 & pp.108ff.

9 Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge", *The Bugbear of Literacy* Perennial Books, London, 1979, pp.72-73.

10 Quoted in Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* p.199.

Guénon's mission was twofold: to reveal the metaphysical roots of the "crisis of the modern world" and to explain the ideas behind the authentic and esoteric teachings that still remained alive... in the East.¹¹

For those who accept Guénon's premises his work is a voice crying in the European wilderness. However, as both Schuon and Perry have stressed, Guénon's function cannot strictly be termed "prophetic", the age of prophecy being over. Schuon:

If on the doctrinal plane the Guénonian work has a stamp of unicity, it may not be useless to point out that this is owing not to a more or less "prophetic" nature—a supposition that is excluded and which Guénon had already rejected beforehand—but to an exceptional cyclical conjuncture whose temporal aspect is this "end of the world" in which we live, and whose spatial aspect is—by the same token—the forced convergence of civilisations.¹²

Although certain of his own intellectual realization of the truth Guénon never assumed the role of the spiritual master; he consistently refused those who requested initiation from him.¹³

Like other traditionalists, Guénon did not perceive his work as any kind of essay in creativity or personal "originality", repeatedly emphasising that in the metaphysical domain there was no room for "individualist considerations" of any kind. He certainly did not see himself building a new philosophy or creating a new school of thought. (If it is sometimes necessary to speak of the traditionalist "school" this is merely an expedient.) In a letter to a friend Guénon wrote, "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some

11 Jacob Needleman in his "Foreword" to *The Sword of Gnosis* Penguin, Baltimore, 1974, pp.11-12.

12 From Frithjof Schuon, "L'Oeuvre", quoted in Whitall Perry, "Coomaraswamy: The Man, Myth and History", p160. For some reflections by Frithjof Schuon on Guénon see "Definitions" in *Sophia* 1:2 Winter 1995; and Schuon's contributions to *Les Dossiers H: René Guénon* ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1984, and *L'Herne: René Guénon* ed. Jean-Pierre Laurant, Les Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1985 (which also includes a letter from Guénon to Schuon, 16th April, 1946).

13 See Jean-Pierre Laurant, "Le problème de René Guénon", pp.62-64.

traditional ideas."¹⁴ When reminded of the people who had been profoundly influenced by his writings he calmly replied, "...such disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way which is totally independent of any individualistic consideration...".¹⁵ It was Guénon's role to remind a forgetful world, "'in a way that can be ignored but not refuted', of first principles and to restore a lost sense of the Absolute".¹⁶

Ananda Coomaraswamy was a much more public figure than René Guénon but here we shall concern ourselves less with biographical matter than with a few observations about the influence and significance of his work. By the end of his life Coomaraswamy was thoroughly versed in the Scriptures, mythology, doctrines and arts of many different cultures and traditions. He was an astonishingly erudite scholar, a recondite thinker and a distinguished linguist. He was a prolific writer, a full bibliography running to upwards of a thousand items on geological studies, art theory and history, linguistics and philology, social theory, psychology, mythology, folklore, religion and metaphysics. He lived in three continents and maintained many contacts, both personal and professional, with scholars, antiquarians, artists, theologians and spiritual practitioners from all over the globe.

We can discern in Coomaraswamy's life and work three principal interests which shaped his ideas and writings: a concern with social and political questions connected with the conditions of daily life and work, and with the problematic relationship of the present to the past and of the "East" to the "West"; a fascination with traditional arts and

14 Whitall Perry, "The Man and His Witness" in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.7.

15 Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom" in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.356.

16 Whitall Perry, "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History", p.163.

crafts which impelled an immense and ambitious scholarly enterprise; and thirdly, an emerging preoccupation with religious and metaphysical questions which was resolved in a "unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition".¹⁷ Allowing for some oversimplification, we can distinguish three "roles" in Coomaraswamy's intellectual life: social commentator and Indologist, historian of Asian art, perennial philosopher. Each of these roles was dominant during a certain period in his life. However, his early concerns took on a different character when Coomaraswamy, following the encounter with the work of Guénon, arrived at a thoroughly traditionalist understanding.

The influence of Guénon was decisive. Coomaraswamy discovered Guénon's writings through Heinrich Zimmer some time in the late '20s and, a few years later, wrote,

...no living writer in modern Europe is more significant than René Guénon, whose task it has been to expound the universal metaphysical tradition that has been the essential foundation of every past culture, and which represents the indispensable basis for any civilisation deserving to be so-called.¹⁸

Several commentators have detailed the creative reciprocal influences which flowed between Coomaraswamy and Guénon.¹⁹ We shall not go over this ground again here. However, it is worth noting that Coomaraswamy told one of his friends that he and Guénon were "entirely in agreement on metaphysical principles" which, of course, did not preclude some divergences of opinion over the applications of these principles on the phenomenal plane.²⁰

17 Roger Lipsey quoted in Whitall Perry, "The Bollingen Coomaraswamy Papers and Biography", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 11:4, p.206.

18 Coomaraswamy quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy; His Life and Work* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, p.170.

19 See Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", pp3-7; Marco Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 12: 3&4, pp.176-182; and Marco Bastriocchi, "The Last Pillars of Wisdom", pp.350-359.

20 Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.5.

The vintage Coomaraswamy of the later years is to be found in his masterly works on Vedanta and on the Catholic scholastics and mystics.²¹ His work on the Platonic, Christian and Indian conceptions of sacred art is also unrivalled. Some of his work is labyrinthine and not easy of access. It is often laden with a mass of technical detail and with linguistic and philological subtleties which test the patience of some readers. Of his own methodology as an exponent of metaphysics Coomaraswamy wrote,

We write from a strictly orthodox point of view...endeavouring to speak with mathematical precision, but never employing words of our own, or making any affirmation for which authority could not be cited by chapter and verse; in this way making our technique characteristically Indian.²²

Sometimes one wishes the chapter and verse documentation was not quite so overwhelming! Coomaraswamy was much more scrupulous than Guénon in this respect, the latter sometimes ignoring the niceties of scholarship at the cost of exposing some of his claims to scholarly criticism.

Coomaraswamy brought to the study of traditional metaphysics, sacred art and religious culture an aesthetic sense and a scholarly aptitude not found in Guénon. The Frenchman had, as Reynolds observes, "no great sensitivity for human cultures".²³ In a sense Coomaraswamy brings the principles about which Guénon wrote, down to a more human level. His work evinces more of a sense of history, and a feel for the diverse and concrete circumstances of human experience.

21 Coomaraswamy himself remarked: "I have little doubt that my later work, developed out of and necessitated by my earlier works on the arts and dealing with Indian philosophy and Vedic exegesis, is really the most mature and most important part of my work." Quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy; His Life and Work* p.248.

22 Quoted in V.S. Naravane, "Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Critical Appreciation" in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.206.

23 P.L. Reynolds, *René Guénon: His Life and Work* (unpublished manuscript), p.6.

There is also a sense of personal presence in Coomaraswamy's writings which is absent in Guénon's work which, to some readers at least, must appear somewhat abstract and rarefied. As Gai Eaton put it, to move from Guénon's work to Coomaraswamy's is to "...descend into a far kindlier climate, while remaining in the same country...The icy glitter is replaced by a warmer glow, the attitude of calm disdain towards all things modern by a more human indignation."²⁴ Whitall Perry contrasts their roles through a metaphor which each would have appreciated:

Guénon was like the vertical axis of a cross, fixed with mathematical precision on immutable realities and their immediate applications in the domain of cosmological sciences; whereas Coomaraswamy was the horizontal complement, expanding these truths over the vast field of arts, cultures, mythologies and symbolisms: metaphysical truth on the one hand, universal beauty on the other.²⁵

Like Guénon before him, Schuon drew a cloak of anonymity around his personal life. (Recall Coomaraswamy's observation about Guénon: "the least important thing about Guénon is his personality or biography...The fact is he has the invisibility that is proper to the complete philosopher..."²⁶) From an early age Schuon devoted himself to a study of philosophy, religion and metaphysics, reading the classical and modern works of European philosophy, and the sacred literatures of the East. Amongst the Western sources Plato and Eckhart left a profound impression while the *Bhagavad Gita* was his favourite Eastern reading. Even before moving to Paris Schuon came into contact with the writings of Guénon with whom he corresponded for many years and later met in Cairo. Guénon's work "served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilisation while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their

²⁴ Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* Faber & Faber, London, 1949, p.199.

²⁵ Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.7.

²⁶ Coomaraswamy in S. Durai Raja Singam *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* p.223.

traditional applications."²⁷ The accent of this passage is important. Schuon was not a disciple of Guénon whose writings only helped to clarify an understanding already attained. For this reason it is improper to label the thought of Schuon as "Guénonian". Indeed, in many respects, Schuon surpasses his predecessor in the exposition of the eternal *dharma*. (In any event, it needs be remembered that, "To follow Guénon is not to follow the man, but to follow the light of traditional truth..."²⁸)

Schuon combined in himself something of the qualities of both Guénon and Coomaraswamy. His work includes psychic, moral and aesthetic dimensions which are missing from Guénon's writings. As Jean Tourniac has remarked

Un autre écrivain, M. Frithjof Schuon, devait, pour sa part, développer l'exégèse spirituelle des formes traditionnelles dans une série d'ouvrages d'un genre différent de ceux de Guénon, ouvrages de "coloration" ...le mot n'est pas excessif, car la beauté et la couleur jouent un rôle particulier dans l'oeuvre de F. Schuon...plus "christique" que ceux de Guénon qui, eux, s'en tiennent d'abord, et essentiellement, à la définition des mécanismes principaux invariables.²⁹

Schuon's work has a symmetry and an inclusive quality not found in the work of his precursors; there is a balance and fullness which give his writings something of the quality of a spiritual therapy. In this sense Schuon does not simply write about the perennial philosophy but gives it a direct and fresh expression proportioned to the needs of the age.

27 *Frithjof Schuon, Metaphysician and Artist* World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, p.2. See also Whitall Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition" in *The Unanimous Tradition* ed. Ranjit Fernando, Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, 1991, pp.14-16.

28 Bernard Kelly, "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions" in *Religion of the Heart* pp.160-161.

29 J. Tourniac, *Propos sur René Guénon* Paris 1973, p16, quoted in P.L. Reynolds, p13. (Trans: "Another writer, M. Frithjof Schuon, for his part, had to develop the spiritual exegesis of traditional forms in a series of works of a different kind to those of Guénon, works of high colour—this word is not excessive, for beauty and colour play a distinctive role in the work of F. Schuon—more 'Christly' than those of Guénon which essentially hold themselves to defining the mechanisms of invariable principles.")

The contrast with Guénon can be clearly seen in the style and tone of language. If Guénon's expositions can be called "mathematical", Schuon's might be described as "musical"—this, of course, not implying any deficiency in precision but rather the addition of a dimension of Beauty. As Nasr has observed of Schuon's writings,

His authoritative tone, clarity of expression and an "alchemy" which transmutes human language to enable it to present the profoundest truths, make of it a unique expression of the...*sophia perennis*...³⁰

Marco Pallis refers to what he rather loosely calls "the gift of tongues": "...the ability, that is to say, both to speak and to understand the various dialects through which the Spirit has chosen to communicate itself...the power to penetrate all traditional forms..."³¹

Like Guénon, Schuon appears to have an intuitive grasp of metaphysical and cosmological principles but he is less likely to subordinate facts to principles in a way which would leave his work vulnerable to scholarly attack. One sometimes senses in Guénon's work an impatience with and disdain for empirical and historical considerations. Schuon's commitment to first principles is no less steadfast but he has much more sensitivity to the exigencies and diversities of human experience and to the spiritual textures of different civilisations. In this sense he is closer to Coomaraswamy with whom he also shares a discerning eye for the spiritual riches of traditional art. Although formidably learned Schuon's approach is less academic and scholarly than Coomaraswamy's, less burdened with technical minutiae and the ever-proliferating qualifications which sometimes make Coomaraswamy's work something of an obstacle course. As a writer he is more discursive and fluid, and more poetic, than either Guénon or Coomaraswamy.

For Schuon the study of tradition has meant, primarily, the study of religion within a metaphysical framework. Guénon's work was

30 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Preface to Frithjof Schuon *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* p.viii.

31 Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* Peter Owen, London, 1960, p.78.

fixed on questions of principle and on arcane repositories of metaphysical wisdom. Coomaraswamy's interests were wide-ranging indeed but, for the most part, underpinned by his preoccupation with the relationships of truth, beauty and goodness. Schuon, on the other hand, moves in a boundless universe, being concerned with the spiritual life in all its aspects. He has written of religion in all its dimensions—doctrinal, ethical, psychological, historical, social, aesthetic and so on. He is equally at home with the most abstruse subtleties of, say, Eckhart's exposition of metaphysical knowledge, and the simple pieties of a European peasant. The explanation of the exoteric-esoteric distinction is fundamental in Schuon's work but, unlike Guénon, he does not restrict himself to the latter domain alone. His books are more finely attuned to the legitimate claims of religious forms and of the theological orthodoxies than those of either of his precursors. He situates the exoteric and esoteric aspects of religion in a framework that gives to each its due.

Writing of the work of Guénon and Coomaraswamy, Whitall Perry suggested that

The complement and copestone of this witness remained to be realised in the message of Schuon, coming freshly from the sphere of the *Religio Perennis*, in contradistinction to the *Philosophia Perennis* which was the legacy of the other two. His was the third pole, needed to complete the triangle and integrate the work on an operative basis.³²

There is a nobility of spirit in Schuon's work which makes it something much more than a commanding body of ideas: it is a profoundly moving *theoria* which reverberates in the deepest recesses of one's being. Without question, he is the most sublime metaphysician of the age. It is not without reason that Whitall Perry has compared Schuon's work to that of Plato and Shankaracharya.³³ In Schuon's work we find the richest, the most authoritative and the most resonant expression of the *sophia perennis* in modern times. One might borrow the following words, applied to Meister Eckhart but equally true of Schuon:

32 Whitall Perry, "The Man and the Witness", p.7.

33 Whitall Perry, "The Revival of Interest in Tradition", p.15.

Being wholly traditional in the truest sense, and therefore perennial, the doctrine he expounds will never cease to be contemporary and always accessible to those who, naturally unsatisfied with mere living, desire to know how to live, regardless of time or place.³⁴

34 C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977, p.xiv.