

An excerpt from
Enduring Utterance: Collected Lectures
by Martin Lings

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Preface

The chapters of this book are based on transcripts of various talks delivered by Dr. Martin Lings. It was Dr. Lings' custom to prepare notes which he would use as cues for the different points he wished to mention in a talk. This would not be a script from which he would read, but an *aide memoire* that permitted him a degree of spontaneity that gave his talks a certain personal touch whilst keeping within a given topic. It also meant that he might elaborate during the course of a talk on one aspect on a certain occasion more than he might have done at another time, even though the talk as a whole would revolve around the same basic themes.

It is almost inevitable that an edited transcript should differ from the talk itself, as the spoken words of even the most eloquent speaker differ from what he might compose as a text. Therefore, what I have attempted to do here is render the spoken word as a written text with minimal adjustment, which is indeed the editor's job, and is a view that Dr. Lings himself is known to have expressed. I have tried to eliminate any repetition or hesitation which occurs quite naturally in spontaneous speech. I have also tried to retain something of the immediacy and vitality of the spoken word in the various chapters, without transforming them into a dissertation or reducing them to the flatness we might encounter in a scholarly textbook. I take responsibility, and apologize in advance, for any omissions or errors that may have occurred during the compilation.

All manifestation derives from a Primary Cause, apart from

which nothing can exist. Therefore all things are interconnected in one way or another due to their relationship to this Cause, which they share in common and of which they are reflected aspects. Martin Lings dedicated his life to the search for this Principle which expresses itself in many forms.

In these times when religion is subject to criticism from various quarters, it can be helpful to approach the topic from the top down, rather than the other way round. In other words, from the point of view of the Absolute. It is easy to censure religion by highlighting particular shortcomings, limitations and omissions, or by comparing the differing dogmas and concluding that they cannot all be true, or that none of them are true. But we live in a world of contingencies, and it is this world that the religions occupy, being particular irruptions of a common source into a realm of discrete phenomena where we generally fail to perceive the interconnectedness of all things.

Thus, the chapters are arranged in an order that begins, in a sense, with the more universal and leads on to the more specific. Those talks which deal primarily with the major plays of Shakespeare appear in a sister volume.

Trevor Banyard

Metaphysics and the Perennial Philosophy

MY TALK IS CALLED *Metaphysics and the Perennial Philosophy*, the word “metaphysics” coming first; that is not an important detail, but it explains why I begin by mentioning that René Guénon only once, as far as I know, entered into the academic world, which he did in answering an invitation from the Sorbonne University in Paris to give a talk on metaphysics. And in that talk, which was entitled *La Métaphysique Orientale*, he began by saying that it would perhaps be better just to say metaphysics, *la métaphysique*, without any epithet, because pure metaphysics, being beyond all form and all contingencies, is neither Eastern nor Western: it is universal. He meant by beyond “form,” of course, beyond any particular religious form, and by “contingency,” the demands of perspective and the demands of human capacity. He objected also to the English “s” on the end of “metaphysics”; he said, “Why do you not call it ‘metaphysic’? why this plural?” It is not really a plural, of course, it means that it comes “after physics”: *meta*-physics.

Now, Guénon would have accepted as a partial synonym for “metaphysical” the word “supernatural,” only on condition that “supernatural” is taken to mean “beyond this world” and, microcosmically speaking, “beyond body and soul.” Frithjof Schuon sometimes speaks of the metacosm, meaning the next world rather than this world, and the metacosm in this sense is the lowest domain of metaphysics; the highest domain being

at the divine level itself, and the summit being the Absolute. Metaphysics comprises all this domain, from the Absolute-Infinite-Perfection of the divine Essence to the lowest of the Paradises of the next world.

To go back to that summit which is sometimes called the divine Essence, tradition is universal in this. In Hinduism, *Brahma*—the neuter form of the word—and also *Atma*, which means Self, denote this Absolute-Infinite-Perfection, and both *Brahma* and *Atma* are expressed by the divine monosyllable *Om*, and they are referred to as *Tat*, which means That.

This oldest living esoterism is identical in its metaphysical doctrine with Sufism, which is the youngest living esoterism. Here, the divine Essence is also absolutely beyond duality, and beyond duality is what the Hindus mean by *Advaita*. Advaita Vedanta is the Hindu equivalent, therefore, of Sufism. And in Christianity, you all know I think, that Meister Eckhart insisted that beyond God in the ordinary sense there is the Godhead, and he insisted on making this distinction, which created a certain scandal in the Vatican.

According to metaphysics, this one metaphysical doctrine, only Absolute-Infinite-Perfection is real; all else is illusion. In Hinduism, the word *Maya* is used for illusion. In Islam—in Sufism, that is—it is called the “veil,” *ḥijāb*, and in both traditions, illusion begins already at the divine level, as soon as there is any question of duality, of manifestation or creation. The monotheistic religions speak of creation, but on the inward side, esoterically, Sufism, like Hinduism, speaks of manifestation. Everything that exists is a manifestation of the Absolute-Infinite-Perfection. Creation or manifestation is the first hint of relativity, that is, of illusion, and this begins at the level of the personal God.

For the ancient Greeks—for Plato—this Absolute was *to agathon*, the Good, and Saint Augustine, you will remember, said it is in the nature of the Good to communicate Itself; and there is a saying in Islam, where God speaks on the tongue

of the Prophet: *I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, and so I created the world—to manifest My Hidden Treasure.* Here is the beginning of illusion: it is a mystery that the Absolute-Infinite-Perfection remains immutable; It cannot change; It is not affected by Its own manifestation, which is illusion, and which proceeds from Him. Just as it proceeds from Him, it returns to Him. Frithjof Schuon sums this up wonderfully in the words, “Being what It is, the Absolute cannot not be immutable, and It cannot not radiate. Immutability, or fidelity to Itself, and radiation, or gift of Itself. There lies the essence of all that is.”¹

The great Algerian Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawī, in one of his poems, speaks of illusion, the veil, that is, everything which proceeds from God. He says: “It is Hidden in Its own Outward Manifestation wherein It doth appear as Veil after Veil made to cover Its Glory,”² that is, the Truth, the Reality, is hidden in Its own outward manifestation, and It appears in this outward manifestation as veil after veil, made to cover Its Glory.

As I said, the lower boundary of metaphysics can be placed at the lowest of the Paradises, and the barrier between the next world and this is represented in many different ways. Here again, in the different expressions of metaphysics in the different traditions the same symbols are used. For example, in Genesis we have the words: *The Spirit of God breathed on the face of the waters... and the waters were divided.*³ Hinduism also speaks of the upper waters and the lower waters. The division of the waters is the distinction between this world, the lower waters, and the next world, which is the higher waters, and the boundary between the two is what I am just going to speak about now.

¹Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Bloomington IN: World Wisdom Books, 1982, p. 42.

²The Shaykh al-‘Alawī, *Dīwān*, in Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 3rd ed., Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993, p. 220.

³*Genesis*, I: 2 and 6.

In Islam one has also in the Qur'ān mention of the two seas: one salt and bitter (the lower waters, this world), the other fresh and sweet (the next world, the world of the Heavens and the Paradises). And in ancient Greece one has another very striking symbol: the *Symplegades*, the Clashing Rocks. When the Argonauts went in search of the Golden Fleece, the Clashing Rocks were held apart by the goddess Athene to allow them to pass. The Golden Fleece is clearly representative of all that Man had lost at the Fall. The Qur'ān says, *if you would pass beyond the boundary of Heaven and Earth (and by Heaven here it does not mean the Heaven of the next world, it means simply the sky) do so, but you cannot pass without authority.*⁴ In my book *Symbol and Archetype* the second chapter is called “The Decisive Boundary,” and it is about this particular boundary, which is very important, of crucial importance to us all, because it is that beyond which we have to go, and beyond which even lies what is called spiritually “the heart”, joined often in the expression the “eye of the heart.” That eye is still in the domain of metaphysics, because it is on the other side of the boundary from here. The Golden Fleece was in the domain of metaphysics.

Another symbol is the passage of the Children of Israel across the waters of the Red Sea. That again is an example comparable to the Greek, since God held the waters of the Red Sea apart just as the goddess Athene held the Clashing Rocks apart; and so the Children of Israel were able to pass across, but the sea came together and drowned their enemies. The passage through this Narrow Gate—in the words used by Christ, *Enter ye in at the narrow gate*⁵—is a difficult passage one has to pass through, symbolised in many different ways.

The word “transcendent” strictly speaking coincides with metaphysics. That “trans-” is in the word *meta*, and the word “transcendent” can only be used of what lies beyond the

⁴*Qur'ān*, 55:33. ⁵*St Matthew*, 7:13.

Clashing Rocks, beyond the Narrow Gate, and beyond the barrier—the *barzakh* in Arabic—which separates the two seas.

As to the word “sacred,” which sometimes is synonymous with “transcendent” but is more general, this world was in the beginning sacred, but now the word “sacred” can only be applied to what here below is impregnated with spiritual significance, because what is here below has become polluted, corrupted. What is impregnated with spiritual significance are the divine Messengers, the founders of religion, and those saints who prolong and protect their messages throughout the ages, throughout the centuries. Likewise sacred are the works of sacred art, which are crystallisations of sanctity in stone, and their counterparts in poetry and music. But first of all we must include virgin nature itself, which was created to manifest the Absolute-Infinite-Perfection.

Now, metaphysics is included in *sophia perennis*, in perennial philosophy, as that which concerns the intelligence, but man is not only intelligence. Anything that can be called religion, *religio perennis*, must concern not only part of man, but the whole of man, and man is not only intelligence. Nor is his intelligence altogether in the domain of metaphysics.

When I was a student at Oxford, I was privileged to have C. S. Lewis as my tutor, and I remember a lecture he gave on the mediaeval perspective that prevailed in England in the time of the 13th or 14th century, and he mentioned that it was dominated in many respects by what had been written by Boethius; and according to Boethius, the human intelligence has four levels: firstly—I will give the Latin terms as used by him, because they are easy to understand—*intellectus*, then *ratio*, then *imaginatio*, then *sensus*: Intellect, reason, imagination and the senses. Of those four faculties, only one is in the domain of metaphysics, and that is the Intellect. I remember Lewis emphasising that the Intellect, alone of the faculties, is directly concerned with the transcendent, with the beyond, with the Hereafter. Of the other faculties, reason is, or

should be, the handmaid to the Intellect. The Intellect itself is only concerned with what lies beyond, what is transcendent, in other words, with metaphysical truth.

Metaphysical doctrine means “teaching.” Teaching what? By “what” I mean, “What is it that receives the teaching?” The Intellect? no. I am not using the word “intellect” in the modern misuse of the word, because as you know, it is used to mean simply “intelligence” in modern language, but in the correct sense of the Latin *intellectus* as used by Boethius.⁶ Metaphysical doctrine is not addressed to the Intellect, because the Intellect does not need teaching, being itself metaphysical; it has direct perception of metaphysical realities, and in any case, in the vast majority of men today the Intellect is veiled, so that it cannot be reached by teaching in any case. We will come later to what metaphysical teaching is addressed to, but it is not addressed to the Intellect.

The Intellect is universally recognised as being enthroned in the Heart, and what is meant by “heart” in the inner aspect of the different religions is not the centre of the body, but it is the centre of the soul: the Heart as the centre of the psychic substance. And you have all heard mention of the Eye of the Heart, and only that eye can perceive metaphysical truth directly, and that sight is what man lost at the Fall. Hearts became veiled; this is a universal doctrine, and one finds it in all religions. The Qur’ān says: *It is not the eyesights which are blind, it is the hearts in the breasts which are blind.*⁷ In the “Beatitudes” we are told: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*⁸ That sight is always associated with the Heart. The Prophet of Islam said: *My heart is awake like the hearts of the prophets before me.* The “wake” of the Heart means that it can see; the eye is open. And the main purpose in all esoterisms is to open that inward eye which is blind in the soul.

⁶Hence the capitalisation of Intellect in this transcription.

⁷Qur’ān, 22:46. ⁸St Matthew, 5:8.

Eckhart was referring to this when he said, “There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable... and this is the intellect;”⁹ and this is the Intellect in the true sense as used by Boethius, and it is the Intellect which sees the metaphysical realities of the next world. That is what the inner aspect of religion is concerned with; wherever one goes, Hinduism, Buddhism and the three monotheistic religions in their mysticisms are all concerned primarily with this.

It is as if at the Fall of Man human consciousness had been abstracted from the Heart, and then drawn out backwards and downwards through the Narrow Gate in the wrong direction, between the Clashing Rocks, again in the wrong direction, so as to be imprisoned altogether in this world. In other words, at the Fall man lost the direct sense of the Transcendent. Hence, the need for metaphysics, which is, as we have seen, the doctrine of the Transcendent.

To go back to the question of teaching, in some very exceptional cases, that doctrine can unveil the Intellect, if it is not too heavily veiled, in a flash of light, as it were, and that is sometimes called “intellection”; but that is a grace which no one has the right to rely on as a possibility for oneself. The main function of metaphysics has to do with what we call intuition. The Heart is, as we have seen, on the other side of the Narrow Gate and the Clashing Rocks, but the human mind is not immediately on this side of that Gate. Above the mind there lies what we sometimes call the higher reaches of human intelligence, and these reaches are the domain of intuition. I will come back in a moment to the effect of metaphysics in this domain, but first of all I must say a word about the perennial philosophy.

There is, at the end of one of Frithjof Schuon’s books, the English version of which is called *Light on the Ancient Worlds*:

It has been said more than once that total Truth is inscribed in an immortal script in the very substance

⁹Meister Eckhart, Sermon 24.

of our spirit; what the different Revelations do is to “crystallize” and “actualize,” in different degrees... a nucleus of certitudes that not only abides forever in the divine Omniscience, but also sleeps by refraction... in the kernel of the individual...¹⁰

In other words, according to the perennial philosophy, total Truth is inscribed in the depths of every human being, where in most cases today it sleeps “in the kernel of the individual.” But it sleeps in different degrees.

There is a reference to *religio perennis* implicitly—not, of course, explicitly—in Sophocles’ play *Antigone*; a very moving passage. The situation is as follows: the two sons of Oedipus have been fighting against each other in a civil war and both brothers are killed, and after the battle Creon, the King of Thebes, gives an order that the brother who was loyal to Thebes shall be buried with all honours, but that the other brother, who was fighting against the city, his body must be left on the battlefield to rot, and nobody must bury it. Antigone is their sister, and she goes to the king and says that he cannot make this decree, that he must allow her to bury the brother; even though he was fighting against the city, he must allow her to go out and bury her brother, and he refuses. And she says, *I did not think that you would be capable of acting against the unwritten and unfailing statutes of the gods: these are not of today nor yesterday, but from all time, and no one knoweth when they were first put forth.* That is a very clear reference to *religio perennis*, something which, as Schuon says, is inscribed in our intelligences, and it is something universal. It is not a question of how a body is to be buried, whether to be burnt, or whether to be placed in the earth; it is a question of the fact that the living are under the obligation to look after their dead. They cannot abandon them. This is an aspect, which Antigone understood, of these *unwritten and unfailing statutes of the gods.*

¹⁰Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965.

And there lies the tragedy: she disobeys Creon and—well, you might look at the play for yourselves, because it is indeed a wonderful play.

I will again quote what Frithjof Schuon says about the development of the cycle:

In the Golden Age men lived on the memory of the lost Paradise, and on their inward religion that was *religio perennis*. They did not need an outwardly revealed religion. Then men became affected by passions to the point of forgetting certain aspects of Truth, and religions like Hinduism were revealed. But when passions dominated men, still more religions were needed, like the last three of this cycle of time, but each one has an inner aspect like the older religions which is centred on metaphysical truth.¹¹

Again, I will quote from Schuon, and this is to do with metaphysics, and it is very relevant to this talk:

Knowledge saves only on condition that it enlists all that we are. Only when it is a way which tills, and which transforms, and which wounds our nature as the plough wounds the earth. Metaphysical knowledge is sacred; it is the right of sacred things to demand of man all that he is.¹²

What is this “all”? I mentioned earlier, in connection with metaphysics, that man is not only intelligence, and this “all” is intelligence, will and character, or one could say instead of character, soul or psychic substance. And that is why the revealed religions, which deal with man and are for man, are always threefold. There is always a doctrine, there is always a method, and there is always a moral aspect; of these three, doctrine relates to the intelligence; it is the will that has to impose the method; and morals concern the psychic substance—they are the virtues. Every religion is Truth, Way and Virtue.

¹¹Frithjof Schuon, adapted from *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*.

¹²*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Perennial Books, 1970), p. 138.

To go back to the question of metaphysical teaching, I said that it is concerned first of all with the intuition, which lies in what we may call the higher reaches of the psychic substance, beyond the mind, but on this side still of the Narrow Gate and the Clashing Rocks; not yet in contact with the Heart directly, but nonetheless, metaphysical teaching creates in the domain of the intuitions vibrations. When the seeker hears metaphysical truths, vibrations will be made in the higher reaches of his intelligence, and these vibrations should normally awaken corresponding vibrations in the deeper reaches of the will, because, relatively speaking, we can speak of height and depth. The domain of the intuitions is objective in a certain sense; the domain of the will is more subjective; and these vibrations in the deeper reaches of the will are rather subjective vibrations corresponding to the objective vibrations of the intuition. And the will, thanks to these vibrations, chooses the Absolute rather than the relative; it chooses the Infinite rather than the finite; it chooses the Eternal rather than the ephemeral; and the will says to the soul, "I have decided that we shall follow a spiritual path."

But here comes the main problem of a spirituality: the will cannot say to the soul, "and you will like it." In other words, you can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink. And that is the great problem, because, if the horse does not drink, then everything is lost, or rather, no progress can be made. And here is the origin of what in Islam is called the Greater Holy War. Returning from a victory in one of his last military campaigns, the Prophet said: *We have returned from the lesser holy war to the greater holy war*, and they said to him, *What is the greater holy war?* and he said, *The war against the soul.*¹³

The problem here is that the soul is made up of multiple elements. In fallen man these elements are in chaos, and many of them are dormant, and they all have to be put in their right

¹³A hadith often quoted by the Sufis and reported by Ghazālī in the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

place; they all have to be won over, and that is why something like war may be said to take place. The means of war are, as you know, different kinds of asceticism, for example. All that has to do with compelling the soul to submit, because the soul has to come to love spirituality. It is only then that unity can be established in the soul of the seeker, and then there is no longer any difficulty or any problem.

In his book *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, Schuon says something very pertinent to this: “It is all very well for the intelligence to affirm metaphysical and eschatological truths”—eschatological has to do with our final ends—“the imagination and the subconscious continue to believe firmly in the world, not in God, not in the Hereafter.”¹⁴ And in another passage elsewhere, he says, “The Way calls for a re-education and a regeneration of imagination and feeling, which are falsified by the world.”¹⁵ It is in fact the world that determines them, whereas they should live on the concrete consciousness of our final ends. This is the great difficulty which is faced in spirituality, and it explains a lot of what one reads of mystical treatises in the different traditions.

Another quotation, again from Schuon, is a particular truth which I have never come across anywhere but in his writings. I have often quoted it myself:

The usual religious arguments, through not probing sufficiently to the depth of things, and moreover not having previously had any need to do so, are psychologically somewhat outworn, and fail to satisfy certain requirements of causality. If human societies degenerate, on the one hand, with the passage of time, they accumulate, on the other hand, experiences in virtue of old age, however intermingled with errors these may be. This paradox is something that any pastoral teaching intended to be effective should take account of, not by drawing new directives

¹⁴World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2012, p. 6. ¹⁵*Book of Keys*, 642.

from the general error, but by using arguments of a higher order, intellectual rather than sentimental.¹⁶

An example of these errors of what pastoral teaching should not do, and which is continually being done, is the argument previously used that there is only one religion. Each religion claimed to be the only one, the only effective religion. That is now outworn, simply because man, the collectivity, has accumulated by old age a certain wisdom, and it will not accept things like that, which were accepted in the Middle Ages. They were true in a sense, because if a person is practising one religion, practising it well, faithfully, in a concentrated manner, it is for him the only religion. In that particular sense, there is a saying by a Sufi shaykh that if a person wants to find water, he will dig in one place; he will not start digging in one place and then go somewhere else. In that way he will never find water, but if he continues to dig in one place he will in the end find water. But today such an argument works in a different manner; it is a good argument, it has not lost its goodness, but it does not work as regards there being only one religion, because people are now in contact with many other religions, and they see there must be more than one true religion, and God cannot have deceived most of humanity.

As for “drawing... directives from the general error.” That is significant, because the other day only, the Pope announced that he saw nothing in the teachings of Teilhard de Chardin contrary to religion. It is ironical, because the Church latterly has always been a little behind the times, and now, when more and more scientific books are being written and published proving scientifically that the doctrine of evolution is false, and that all scientific evidence is more on the side of Genesis than on the side of Darwin, the Vatican, in order to be up to date, has to come in at this late hour and say a good word for

¹⁶*Form and Substance in the Religions*, ch. 16, “The Human Margin”.

Teilhard de Chardin. That is an example of drawing directives from error, the existing error.

Schuon goes on to say, speaking of basic human values, where does a man's spiritual worth lie? Is it in his intelligence? his discernment? his metaphysical knowledge? Obviously not, if this knowledge is not combined with a realising will, and with an inclusive virtue, or virtues which are at least sufficient. Is it his realising will which constitutes his worth? his power of concentration? No, if this is not combined with the necessary minimum of doctrinal knowledge and with virtue. And spiritual worth likewise does not consist in virtue, if this is not accompanied by a doctrinal understanding that is at least sufficient, and by an equivalent realising effort.

Obviously the most brilliant intellectual knowledge is fruitless in the absence of the corresponding realising initiative, and in the absence of the necessary virtue. In other words, knowledge is nothing if it is combined with spiritual laziness and with pretension, egoism, hypocrisy. Likewise, the most prestigious power of concentration is nothing if it is accompanied by doctrinal ignorance and moral insufficiency. Likewise again, natural virtue is but little without the doctrinal Truth and spiritual practice, which operate it with a view to God, and which thus restore to it the whole point of its being.

And Schuon says as regards the spiritual effort: "Remove the rust from the Heart, and the Intellect will be released." That is, as I said, the essential concern of all spirituality, especially at the beginning. The Eye of the Heart is veiled, and in Islam, in Sufism for example, they speak of rust over the Heart, hence "remove the rust from the Heart." That means that the Eye will be able to see, and the Intellect will be released. He goes on to say, "This release is strictly impossible—we must insist upon it—without the co-operation of a religion, an orthodoxy, a traditional esoterism, with all that this implies."

Let me end my talk with just mentioning that the existence

of such writings as these places a very great responsibility upon us. We are all, whatever our years, old, because of what I have just recently quoted. We are living at the end of the cycle. One might ask: “Well, what is the difference between us and the Middle Ages? Five hundred years, what is five hundred years in a cycle which consists of many thousands of years?” But the answer is that in the Middle Ages, that old age of the cycle was overlaid by the youth of Christianity and the youth of Islam. Now, both Christianity and Islam are clearly in their old age, so that there is no youth to rejuvenate this old age, and that is why everybody today is old; whether they are young in years or old in years, they all have a certain old age, and with everybody the question arises: “Which aspect of old age are we to choose? the positive aspect or the negative aspect?” The fact is that the vast majority of people, without realising it, have chosen the negative aspect, which is senility. We have the possibility of choosing the positive aspect of old age, which is wisdom. Each one of us—theoretically speaking, at any rate—has that possibility. So let us reflect on this, and let us make our choice.

René Guénon

THIS IS A VERY LARGE SUBJECT I have undertaken, and I am going to do what I can; but as regards the life of René Guénon—the early part of his life, at any rate—our knowledge is very limited because of his extreme reticence. There must have seldom been a man so objective as he was, and his objective view of the world, which is one aspect of his greatness, made him realise the evils of subjectivism and individualism in the modern world, and he seems to have applied this to himself even, rigorously—almost too rigorously. He shrank, in any event, from speaking about himself. After his death, book after book has been written about him, and the authors have no doubt felt often extremely frustrated, being unable to find out various things, and book after book contains factual errors, often small details, but nonetheless the books are full of mistakes.

What we do know is that he was born at Blois, in France, in 1886, that he was the son of an architect, he had a traditional Catholic upbringing, and at school he excelled in philosophy and mathematics. But at the age of twenty-one he was already in Paris in the world of occultism, which was in full ferment at that time, just after the turn of the century, about 1907, and the dangers of that world were perhaps counteracted for him by the fact that it was more open to wider perspectives. And it seems to be about this time that he came in contact with some Hindus in Paris, some Hindus of the Advaita Vedanta school, and one of them initiated him into their own Shivaite line of spirituality. We have no details of time or place, and

he does not ever seem to have spoken about these Hindus, and after one or two years he does not seem to have had any more contact with them. But what he learned from them is in his books, and his meeting with them was clearly providential. His contact with them must have been extremely intense while it lasted, and his books are just what was, and is, needed as antidote to the crisis of the modern world—that is the title of one of his books, *The Crisis of the Modern World*¹—and the perspective of his books largely coincides with the Hindu perspective. But by the time he was thirty—probably before then—his phenomenal intelligence had enabled him to see exactly what was wrong with the modern Western world, and that same intelligence had dug him out of it altogether.

Now, I remember that world. At least, I remember practically nothing before the First World War. But I do remember the world into which, and for which, Guénon wrote his first books, and that was in the first decade after the war. That monstrous world was made impenetrable, as has been said, by euphoria. But the First World War did not make any difference to that really, because that was the war to end war. After the First World War the euphoria was even worse. Now there would never be another war, and science had “proved” that man was descended from the ape, that is, he had progressed from the ape, and this progress would continue now with nothing to impede it. Everything would get better and better and better.

I remember I was at school at that time, and I remember being taught these things, with just one hour a week being taught the opposite by a religious lesson; but religion in the modern world had long before then been pushed into a corner. From its corner it protested against this euphoria, but to absolutely no avail.

Today the situation is considerably worse and considerably better. It is worse because human beings have degenerated

¹First published as *La Crise du monde moderne*, Paris: Bossard, 1927.

still further; one sees far more bad faces about than one did in the twenties, if I may say so. That is my impression; it may not be everybody's impression. It is better because there is no euphoria at all. The edifice of the modern world is falling into ruin; great cracks are appearing everywhere through which it can be penetrated as it could not before. But it is again worse because the Church, anxious not to be behind the times, has become the accomplice of modernity.

But to return to the world of the twenties, I remember a politician proclaiming, as who would dare to do so now: "We are now in the glorious morning of the world." And at this same time, Guénon wrote of this "wonderful" world: "It is as if an organism with its head cut off were to go on living a life which was both intense and disordered." That is fairly strong. That is from his book *East and West*,² which was published in 1924.

As I said, Guénon seems to have had no further contact with the Hindus, and no doubt they had returned to India. Meantime Guénon had been initiated into a Sufi order which was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life. But among the ills he saw on every side about him, he was very much preoccupied with the general anti-religious prejudice that was particularly rife among the French so-called *intelligentsia*, and he was sure that some of these people were nonetheless virtually intelligent and would be capable of responding to the Truth if it were clearly set before them.

It is not difficult to see why there was this anti-religious prejudice, because the representatives of religion were less and less intelligent, more centred on sentimental considerations; and in the Catholic church, especially where the division of the community into clergy and laity was always stressed, a lay figure had to rely on the Church, for it was not his business to think about spiritual things, and he had to rely on the clergy. Intelligent laymen would ask questions of priests who would

²*Orient et Occident*, Paris: Payot, 1924.

be unable to answer them, and who would take refuge in the idea that intelligence and pride were very closely connected. And so it is not difficult to see how this very anti-religious prejudice came into being, especially in France.

Guénon put himself the question: “Since these people had rejected Christianity, would they be able to accept the Truth when expressed in the Islamic terms of Sufism?”—which were closely related to Christian terms in many respects. He decided that they would not, that they would say: “But this is just another religion, and we have had enough of religion.” But Hinduism, the oldest living religion, is, on the surface and in its manner of speaking, very different from both Christianity and Islam, and he decided to confront the Western world with the Truth on the basis of Hinduism. And to this end he wrote his *General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*.³ This is one of the books that was translated and published by Marco Pallis and Richard Nicholson. The French was published in 1921, to be followed in 1925 by what is perhaps one of the greatest of all Guénon’s books: *Man and his Becoming According to the Vedanta*.⁴

He could not have chosen a better setting for his message of Truth to the West, because of Hinduism’s directness, which results from its having been revealed to man in a remote age when there was not yet a need to make a distinction between esoterism and exoterism. That directness means that the Truth did not have to be veiled. Already in classical antiquity, the Mysteries, that is, esoterism, were for the few, but in Hinduism they were the norm, and the highest truths could be spoken out directly. There was no question of *Cast not your pearls before swine* and *Give not holy things to dogs*.⁵ Also we must remember that the caste system in India, which has been the object of untold attacks, was precisely the preserver of Hinduism. It

³*Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, 1921.

⁴*L’homme et son devenir selon le Vedântâ*, Paris: Brossard, 1925.

⁵*St Matthew*, 7:6.

is thanks to the caste system that Hinduism has remained more or less intact down to the present day, whereas its sister religions, for example, the religions of Greece and Rome, have long since perished. The caste system with the Brahmins as safeguarders of religion is responsible for the fact that we have today a Hinduism which has not decayed and is still living, and which down to this century has produced flowers of sanctity.

One of the points to be mentioned first is the question of the distinction which has to be made at the divine level, and which is made in all esoterisms, but which cannot be made in exoterism, in religion as given to the masses today: the distinction between the Absolute and the beginnings of relativity. The Absolute, which is One, Infinite, Eternal, Immutable, undetermined, unconditioned, is termed *Atma*, which means Self, and *Brahma*,⁶ which is a neuter word that serves to emphasise that it is beyond all duality, such as male and female. It is also termed That, quite simply, *Tat*, just as in Sufism the Absolute is sometimes termed “He,” *Huwa*. The Absolute is represented in Hinduism by the sacred monosyllable *Om*.

Then we have what corresponds in other religions to the personal God, *Ishvara*, which is the beginning already of relativity, because It is concerned with manifestation—the term the Hindus use for Creation—and Creation is clearly the beginning of a duality: Creator and created. *Ishvara* is at the divine level, but It is the beginning of relativity, and in all esoterism one has this same doctrine. It may be recalled that Meister Eckhart came into difficulties with the Church because he insisted on making a distinction between God and Godhead, *Gott* and *Gottheit*, and he used the second term for the Absolute, that is, the absolute Absolute, and *Gott* for the relative Absolute. It could have been the other way round, but

⁶The neuter *Brahma* (as opposed to the masculine) is equivalent to *Brahman* (see below).

it was just that he needed to make some difference. In Sufism one speaks of the divine Essence and the essential Names of God, such as “The One,” “The Truth,” “The All-Holy,” “The Living,” and one or two other Names like that. “The Infinitely Good” also, and by that I mean *al-Raḥmān*, which contains the roots of all goodness, but which is a Name also of the divine Essence. And below that there are the Names which are called the Names of Qualities, like Creator, for example, and “The Merciful,” in the sense of “One who has Mercy,” and so on, and that is clearly the beginning of a duality. In every esoterism one has this distinction made even at the level of the Divinity. One cannot have it below esoterism because it would result in the idea of two gods, and a division in the Divinity would be exceedingly dangerous in the hands of the mass of believers. It would cause all sorts of problems, and the Divine Unity has to be maintained at all costs.

Guénon in this book traces with wonderful clarity the hierarchy of the Universe from the Absolute, and from the personal God, down to the created *Logos*, *Buddhi*, which also means Intellect, and which has three aspects which are named *Brahma*—but this time the word is masculine—*Vishnu* and *Shiva*. In the hierarchy of the Universe these three aspects are called *Deva*, which is the word for god, the same word linguistically as the Latin *Deus*, but strictly speaking they have the rank really of what we would call Archangels. They are created, but Hinduism is so subtle that they can be invoked, because they descend from the Absolute and they return to the Absolute. They are symbols of the Absolute, and they can be invoked in the sense of the absolute *Brahman*, of *Atma* and of *Om*. That is why one has in Hinduism the invocations of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*.

The Hindu doctrine, like Genesis, speaks of the two waters. The Qur’ān is the same; it speaks of the two seas, which are the Upper Waters and the Lower Waters. The Upper Waters represent the higher aspect of the created world,

that is, the manifested world, corresponding to the different Heavens in which are the different Paradises. It is all part of the next world from the point of view of this world. The Lower Waters represent the world of body and soul. And all is a manifestation of the Absolute. Having traced the manifestation of Man and shown what is the nature of Man in all its details, Guénon then proceeds to show how, according to Hindu doctrine, Man can return to his absolute source.

This book⁷ is a really remarkable doctrine in itself. It ends with the supreme spiritual possibility of oneness with the Absolute, a oneness which is already there, and, as may well be known, a Brahmin boy at the age of eight, when he is initiated by his father, the words are spoken into his ear: *Thou art That*, meaning: “Thou art the Absolute,” *Tat tvam asi*. This shows how far we are from the outer aspect of religion in the modern world. But that truth which is called in Sufism “the Secret,” *al-Sirr*, is present necessarily in all esoterism in the present day, otherwise it would not deserve the name of esoterism.

Another aspect of Hinduism which made it a perfect vehicle for Guénon’s message is the breadth of its structure, considering the doctrine of the *samsara*, that is, the chain of endless worlds which have been manifested, of which the Universe consists. In the later religions it is as if Providence had shepherded mankind into a narrower and narrower valley. This is providential in that the opening is still the same, always to Heaven, but the outlook on the sides, the horizontal outlook, is narrower and narrower, because man is no longer capable of taking in more than a certain amount; to have the vast aspect which the doctrine of the *samsara* gives us would lead to all kinds of distractions. But nonetheless, when one is speaking of an Absolute, Infinite, Eternal Divinity, the idea that that infinitude produced only one single world in manifesting Itself does not satisfy the intelligence. The

⁷*Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta.*

doctrine of the *samsara* does, on the other hand, satisfy, in that the worlds are innumerable that have been manifested.

Another point is that Hinduism has an amazing versatility. First of all, it depends on divine Revelation; it makes an implacable distinction between Revelation and inspiration. The Vedas are revealed, the *Upanishads* are revealed, the *Bhagavad Gita* is generally considered as revealed, directly revealed in the sense that the Pentateuch was revealed to Moses and that the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet. But this distinction between Revelation, *Sruti*, and inspiration, which is *Smriti*, is made very clearly in Hinduism, and that is something which, of course, Christianity does not have, and the Christians as a rule do not understand that distinction. They have difficulty in realising the distinction of the Pentateuch, that is, Genesis and the other books in the Old Testament, for example, and the Book of Kings and Chronicles, which are simply sacred history: inspired perhaps, but in no sense revealed. The Psalms, on the other hand, are also revealed.

Hinduism also has the *Avataras*, and that a Christian can well understand, that is, the manifestations, the descents, of the Divinity. Of course, a modern Christian would not recognise the descents of the Hindu *Avataras*, because for the average Christian there has only ever been one descent, and that is Christ Himself. But Hinduism recognises that as a possibility, and it has ten *Avataras* who have helped maintain the vitality of the religion down to the present day. And the ninth *Avatara*, which is called the foreign *Avatara*, is the Buddha himself, who, although he appeared in India, was not for Hindus, but clearly for the part of the world east of India.

The breadth of Hinduism is also seen in its prefiguration of exoterism, which is a recognition of the three ways, the three *margas*. These three ways back to God are the way of knowledge, the way of love and the way of action, three ways

which correspond to the inclinations and affinities of different human beings.

Another point which makes Hinduism so right for Europeans, that is, to give them the message in those terms, is that they have as Aryans an affinity with Hinduism, because they are rooted in the religions of classical antiquity. These are sister religions to Hinduism, and their structure was clearly the same as the structure of Hinduism, but, of course, they degenerated into complete decadence and now have disappeared. Nonetheless, our heritage lies in them, and so Guénon gives us, one might say, the possibility of a mysterious renaissance, in a purely positive sense, by his message of the Truth in Hindu terms. But this affinity must not be exaggerated, and Guénon never in fact advised anybody, as far as I know, to become a Hindu. He advised Hindus to remain Hindus, but he never advised anybody who was not a Hindu to become a Hindu.

His message was always one of strict orthodoxy in one esoterism, but, at the same time, equal recognition of all other orthodoxies. Yet his purpose was in no sense academic. His motto was *vincit omnia veritas*, "Truth conquers all," but implicitly this was *Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you*,⁸ and implicit in his writings is the certainty that they will come providentially to those who are qualified to receive his message, and that this would impel them to seek and therefore to find a way.

Guénon was conscious of having a function, and he knew what belonged to this function and what did not belong to it. He knew that it was not his function to have disciples, and he never accepted any. It was his function to teach in preparation for a way that people would find for themselves, and this preparation meant filling in gaps—many of the tremendous gaps—which are left by modern education.

⁸*St Matthew*, 7:7.

The first of these gaps is failure to understand the meaning of the transcendent, and the meaning of the word “intellect” in consequence, a word which always continues to be used. The word “intellectual” is a favourite word on people’s lips, but the Intellect in the true sense of the word, in the traditional sense, corresponding to the Sanskrit *Buddhi*, had simply been forgotten in the Western world. Guénon insisted in his writings on giving this word its true meaning, which is perception of transcendent realities, the faculty which can perceive the things of the next world. Its prolongations in the soul are what might be called intellectual intuitions, which is the preliminary glimmering before intellection in the full sense takes place. One has the impression—but this is pure assumption on my part—that Guénon himself must have had a remarkable intellectual revelation at quite an early age, that he must have perceived directly spiritual truths with the Intellect in the true sense.

He also fills in gaps by explaining the meaning of rites, the meaning of symbols and the hierarchy of the worlds, because in modern education the next world is left out altogether, whereas, in the Middle Ages, students were taught about the hierarchy of the faculties, and correspondingly, the hierarchy of the Universe.

I must for the moment speak on a rather personal level, but perhaps it may not be without interest. When I read the books of Guénon—in the early thirties it must have been—it was as if I had been struck by lightning. I realised that this was the Truth, and that I had never seen the Truth before set down. This message of Guénon that there was not only one religion and all other religions false, that there were many religions and they must all be treated with reverence. They were all on a level, but they were different because they were for different people. It made sense, and it also was at the same time to the glory of God, because a person with even a reasonable intelligence, when taught what we were taught at school, would inevitably

think: “Well, what about the rest of the world? why were things managed in this way? why was the Truth given first of all to the Jews, one people only, to such a small group of people? And then Christianity was ordered to spread over the world, but why so late? why not before? what about previous ages?” and so on. These questions were never answered, but when I read Guénon I knew that this was the Truth, and I knew that I must do something about it, and I wrote to Guénon. I translated one of his first books, *East and West*, into English, and I was in correspondence with him in connection with that. In 1930, after the death of his first wife, Guénon left Paris and went to Cairo for twenty years. He died at the beginning of 1951.

When I read Guénon’s books my first idea was to send them to my greatest friend, who had been a student with me at Oxford, because I knew that he would have just the same reaction as I had, which he did in fact. He came back to the West and, like myself, he sought and found a way of the kind Guénon speaks of in his books. He was in need of work, and he was then given a lectureship at Cairo University, and having got there he managed to discover Guénon’s address. Guénon was extraordinarily secretive; he would not give his address to anybody. He wanted to disappear. He had enemies in France, and he suspected that they wished to attack him by magic. I do not know this for certain, but I know that Guénon was very much afraid of being attacked by certain people, and he wished to remain unknown, to sink himself into the Egyptian world, the world of Islam.

My friend had great difficulty in finding where he was, and still more difficulty when he did write to him finally to ask if he could see him. It took a very long time for that to take place, but finally Guénon agreed to see my friend. This friend of mine was a very intelligent and very charming person, and Guénon became immediately attached to him, and he told him that he could always come to his house whenever he liked.

In the summer of 1939 I went to visit my friend in Cairo,

and when I was there the war broke out. I was lecturing in Lithuania at that time, which was an independent country, but I was unable to get back. I was forced to stay in Egypt, and my friend took me to see Guénon. My friend at that time was doing everything; he was just like a member of the household. He went and collected Guénon's letters from the poste restante; he did all sorts of things for him. A year later, I was out riding in the desert with my friend when his horse ran away with him, and he was killed as the result of an accident. He died of loss of blood. And I shall never forget having to go to tell Guénon of his death. When I did, he just wept for an hour.

The result of that was that I had to take my friend's place. I also was given the freedom of the household, and very quickly I became like one of the family. It was a tremendous privilege, of course. Guénon's wife could not read and she could only speak Arabic. I quickly learnt Arabic, so I was able to talk to her. It was a very happy marriage, and unexpectedly they began to have children. They had been married for seven years without any children, and Guénon had no children by his first wife, and he was getting fairly old. He was much older than she was, but finally they had four children altogether.

I went to see Guénon sometimes almost every day, and I was the first person to read *The Reign of Quantity*⁹—the only book he wrote while I knew him, because the other books were all written before that time—which he gave me chapter by chapter; and I was able to give him also my own first book when I wrote it, *The Book of Certainty*,¹⁰ which I gave him also chapter by chapter. It was a very great privilege to have known such a person.

During this time a rather important question was resolved. The Hindus with whom Guénon had made contact in Paris

⁹*Le Règne de La Quantité et les Signes des Temps*, Editions Gallimard, 1945.

¹⁰Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992.

had given him a wrong idea; they had given him not a strictly Hindu idea about Buddhism. Hinduism recognises the Buddha as the ninth *Avatara* of Vishnu, but some Hindus maintain that he was not an *Avatara*, he was just a revolted *Kshatriya*, that is, a revolted member of the royal caste against the Brahmins. Guénon had accepted this idea, and he wrote about Buddhism as though it was not one of the great religions of the world. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and Marco Pallis all together decided that they would remonstrate with Guénon about this point, and Guénon was very open to being persuaded. I think it was in 1946 when I took Marco Pallis to see Guénon, and the result was that he agreed that he had been mistaken, and that things must be changed in his books that he had written about Buddhism. Marco Pallis started sending him a list of all sorts of pages and other things that needed correction. That was a very important point.

Guénon never went out practically, and I only went out once with him. He did come out to visit us; I would send a car to fetch him, and he would come with his family to our house about twice a year. We lived at that time just near the pyramids outside Cairo. But I did go with him once to visit the mosque of Sayyidnā Ḥusayn in the centre of Cairo, near the Azhar. He had a remarkable presence, and it was very striking to see the respect with which he was treated. As he entered the mosque one could hear people on all sides saying: *Allahumma ṣalli ‘alā Sayyidinā Muḥammad*, that is, “May God rain blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad,” which is a way of expressing great reverence for anybody. He had a really luminous presence, and his very beautiful eyes were one of his most striking features, and they retained their lustre into early old age, because he did not live to be more than sixty-four. I think he was sixty-four when he died.

With his book on the Vedanta ranks his book on symbols, which was published after his death from all the articles that were written about symbols in his journal, which was the Paris

journal, *Études traditionnelles*. It was marvellous to read these articles when they came out, I remember, month after month. Those of you who do not read French and who are able to read it in English I am sure will be fascinated by it. It takes us back almost to prehistoric times, as does *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, but in a wider sense. *Fundamental Symbols* is the title of the book, and the subtitle is *The Universal Language of Sacred Science*.¹¹

Everything is a symbol, of course, everything that exists—it could not exist if it were not a symbol—but the fundamental symbols are those which express eloquently aspects of the supreme Truth and the supreme Way. For example, one of these aspects of both the Way and the Truth is what is called the Axis of the World, the Axis which runs through all the higher states from the centre of this state. That is the meaning of what is called the Tree of Life, which, as is known, is symbolised by many particular trees: the oak and the ash, and the fig, and other trees throughout the world. And the Axis is the Way itself, the Way of return to the Absolute. It is also symbolised by man-made things: the ladder, the mast, weapons like the lance, the central pillar of edifices; and as architects know, many buildings are built round a central axis which is not in fact there, which is not materialised. Very often in traditional houses the hearth was the centre of the house, and the smoke rose up through the chimney, which was also another figure of the axis. And things which are normally horizontal: a bridge is also a symbol of the Axis of the World. Witness the title *pontifex*, the “maker of the bridge,” which

¹¹First published in French as *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée*, Gallimard, 1962. Second, revised edition published in French as *Symboles de la Science sacrée*, Gallimard, 1977. English translation of the first French edition published as *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, tr. Alvin Moore, Jnr, Quinta Essentia, Cambridge, UK, 1995. English translation of second French edition published as *Symbols of Sacred Science*, tr. Henry D. Fohr, Sophia Perennis, 2004.

is given to the highest spiritual authority, who is the bridge between Heaven and Earth.

In this book on symbols another fundamental symbol is the river. There are three aspects to the river, for example, the crossing of the river symbolises always the passage from this world to a higher world. But then there is the river itself. There is the difficulty of moving upstream, which symbolises the difficulties of the spiritual path, returning to one's Source against the current. But there is also the symbolism of moving in the other direction, to the ocean, returning finally to the ocean. That is also another symbol of the Way.

In this book also Guénon treats of the symbolism of the mountain, the cave, the temporal cycle. In the temporal cycle the solstices of summer and winter are the gates of the gods and ancestors according to Hinduism; the gate of the gods is the winter solstice in the sign of Capricorn, and the gate of the ancestors is the summer solstice in the sign of Cancer.

As I said, Guénon did not like to talk about himself, and I respected his reticence. I did not ask him questions, and I think he was pleased with that. But just to sum up what his function was, one might say that it was his function in a world increasingly rife with heresy and pseudo-religion to remind twentieth century man of the need for orthodoxy, which itself presupposes firstly a divine intervention, Revelation, and secondly a tradition that hands down with fidelity, from generation to generation, what Heaven has revealed.

In this connection we are deeply indebted to him for having restored to the world the word "orthodoxy" in the full rigour of its original meaning, that is, "rectitude of opinion," a rectitude which compels the intelligent man not merely to reject heresy, but also to recognise the validity of all those faiths that conform to those criteria on which his own faith depends for its orthodoxy. On the basis of this universality, which is often known as *religio perennis*, it was also Guénon's function to remind us that the great religions of the world are

not only the means of man's salvation, but that they offer him beyond that, even in this life, two esoteric possibilities which correspond to what were known in Graeco-Roman antiquity as *mysteria parva* and *mysteria magna*, the Lesser Mysteries and the Greater Mysteries. The first of these is the way of return to the primordial perfection which was lost at the Fall; the second, which presupposes the first, is the way to gnosis, the fulfilment of the precept *gnothi seauton*, "Know Thyself." And this one ultimate end is termed in Christianity *deificatio*, "deification"; in Hinduism *yoga*, "union," and *moksha*, "deliverance"; in Buddhism *nirvana*, that is, extinction of all that is illusory; and in Islamic mysticism, that is, Sufism, *taḥaqquq*, which means "realisation," which was glossed by a Sufi shaykh as "self-realisation in God."

The Mysteries, and especially the Greater Mysteries, are explicitly or implicitly the main theme of Guénon's writing. Even in *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*, the troubles in question are shown to have sprung ultimately from the loss of the mysterial dimension, that is, the dimension of the Mysteries, of esoterism. He traces all the troubles in the world to the forgetting of the higher aspects of religion.

He was conscious of being a pioneer, and I will end simply by quoting something he wrote of himself: "All that we shall do or say will amount to giving those who come afterwards facilities which we ourselves were not given. Here, as everywhere else, it is the beginning of the work that is hardest." Well that is, I think, all I can say.