

# Towards the Recovery of Wisdom

Some contemporary Asian views of the Western situation  
by Trevor Ling

The most important task facing the West today is the recovery of that spiritual tradition which, by the fourteenth century, had found widespread expression and had its representatives throughout Catholic Europe, but which was then lost in the convulsions which shook the Latin Church in the sixteenth century, as attention was directed predominantly to questions of institutional authority, dogmatic orthodoxy and political advantage. Such, at least, is the view which in varying ways has recently been expressed by men of learning and perception whose viewpoint is that of non-European and non-Christian cultures, notably Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist. There have been suggestions of a similar kind from Christians who have opened their minds to the testimony of these other religions and cultures. Five recently published books which bear upon this subject are Edward Conze's *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*,<sup>1</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Encounter of Man and Nature*,<sup>2</sup> Frithjof Schuon's *In the Tracks of Buddhism*,<sup>3</sup> William Johnston's *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*,<sup>4</sup> and Sisirkumar Ghose's *Mystics and Society*.<sup>5</sup>

The malaise of modern Western society, whose symptoms are high rates of alcoholism and other forms of drug addiction, suicide, violence, the increase of mental illness, the steady but lethal pollution of the atmosphere and the earth's waters, and the prodigal squandering of natural resources with little thought for the future, are seen by more than one of these writers as being connected with the fact that from about the end of the fifteenth century European religion became divorced from the perennial philosophy (with its spiritual understanding of nature) of which until then it had formed a branch. 'Until about 1450', writes Conze, 'as branches of the same "perennial philosophy", Indian and European philosophers disagreed less among themselves than with many of the later developments of European philosophy' (p. 213f). Conze finds his evidence for this in the fact that the term 'perennial philosophy' was 'originally invented by Catholics to describe the philosophy of St Thomas and Aristotle'. He quotes its use by Augustinus Steuchus, Episcopus Kisami, Bibliothecarius to Pope Paul III, in his *De perenni philosophia* (1542), the main proposition of which is stated in the first sentence: '*ut unum est omnium rerum principium, sic unum atque eandem de eo scientiam semper*

<sup>1</sup>Cassirer, London, 1967, pp. xii + 274, 42s.

<sup>2</sup>George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968, pp. 151, 30s.

<sup>3</sup>George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968, pp. 168, 28s.

<sup>4</sup>Desclée Company, New York, 1967, pp. xvi + 285, \$5.50.

<sup>5</sup>Asia Publishing House. London. 1968. pp. xv + 116 25s

*apud omnes fuisse ratio multarumque gentium ac literarum monumenta testantur*' (p. 214).<sup>1</sup> Conze notes the later adoption of the term 'perennial philosophy' by Leibniz 'to designate his own brand of eclecticism'. From the end of the fifteenth century, however, 'in the West, a large number of philosophers discarded the basic pre-suppositions of the "perennial philosophy", and developed by contrast what for want of a better term we may call a "sciential" philosophy' (p. 215). The tenets of the latter, according to Conze, were: that natural science has a cognitive value; that there is no higher being than man, whose power and convenience must be promoted at all costs; that spiritual forces may safely be disregarded; and that the goal of human activity should be the amelioration of life in this world, in accordance with the will of the people. Buddhists, says Conze, must view all these tenets with the utmost distaste, and he himself makes a number of characteristically sardonic comments upon them (for which alone he is worth reading). 'The general trend', he observes, 'has been a continuous loss of spiritual substance between 1450 and 1960, based on an increasing forgetfulness of age-old traditions, an increasing unawareness of spiritual practices, and an increasing indifference to the spiritual life by the classes which dominate society' (p. 216f.). The consequence of this submergence of the spiritual tradition was, first, that Western religion entered into a conflict with natural science; and second, that as a result of wounds sustained in this conflict, Western religion became unsure of itself metaphysically. It can be argued that it was this loss of assurance and balance within Western religion and culture which made possible the cancerous growth of secularism which has spread from Europe wherever modern Western culture has penetrated. No useful purpose would be served in a review article such as this by any attempt to allocate responsibility for the turn taken by Western philosophy since 1450 or thereabouts. The past five centuries may be characterized as the Protestant period; they have been the period of European dominance and exploitation, both of other cultures and of the natural world; they have also been the period of the loss of sight in Europe of the 'perennial philosophy'.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Islamic scholar,<sup>2</sup> expresses a similar view to that of Conze in his book *The Encounter of Man and Nature*. His thesis is as follows: 'that although science is legitimate in itself, the role and function of science and its application have become illegitimate and even dangerous because of the lack of a higher form of knowledge into which science could be integrated and [because of] the destruction of the sacred and spiritual value of nature. To remedy this situation the metaphysical knowledge pertaining to

<sup>1</sup>('The ideas and monuments of many peoples and literatures testify to the fact that just as there is one principle of all things, so have they all always had one and the same knowledge about it.')

<sup>2</sup>Professor of Islamic Studies in Beirut; Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at Teheran.

nature must be revived and the sacred quality of nature given back to it once again. In order to accomplish this end the history and philosophy of science must be reinvestigated in relation to Christian theology and the traditional philosophy of nature which existed during most of European history. Christian doctrine itself should be enlarged to include a doctrine concerning the spiritual significance of nature and this with the aid of Oriental metaphysical and religious traditions where such doctrines are still alive. These traditions would not be so much a source of new knowledge as an aid to *anamnesis*, to the remembrance of teachings within Christianity now mostly forgotten . . .’ (p. 14).

If metaphysics has until recently been discredited in the West this is because, says Nasr, what has been called metaphysics is but an extension of rationalistic philosophy, ‘and at best a pale reflection of true metaphysics’. He makes clear that by metaphysics he means not the so-called metaphysics which philosophers like Heidegger have criticized: ‘Metaphysics, tied to a philosophy that is at once perennial and universal, knows no beginning or end. It is the heart of the *philosophia perennis* . . .’ (pp. 82f.).

F. Schuon, writing on behalf of Buddhism, though not himself a Buddhist, repudiates both the pretensions of what he calls scientism, and the claim made by some modern would-be apologists of Buddhism that its philosophy is harmonious with such scientism. ‘Buddhism provides a decisive argument against any science purporting to be an end in itself and therefore also, by anticipation and in principle, against the contemporary Western scientism: the pith of its argument, which is of universal applicability, consists in the undeniable fact that by becoming “objectively” preoccupied with the phenomenal world man inevitably becomes drawn into the morass of conjectures and illusions and therefore drawn away from the possibility of Deliverance. . . .; scientism, by denying the Intellect and the Absolute, rejects *a priori* the criterion and measure of all knowledge’ (p. 45). Westerners who have but a hearsay knowledge of Buddhism often regard it as a nihilistic and negative philosophy. They need to be made aware that the central Buddhist position is one of positive affirmation (although this may entail the denial of some cherished human illusions). The resemblance between modern existentialism and Buddhism is only superficial; in essentials they are poles apart. ‘There is, O monks, an Unborn, an Unbecome, an Unmade, an Unconditioned; for if there were not this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Unconditioned, no escape from this born, become, made and conditioned would be apparent.’ This saying of the Buddha (*Udāna* viii, 3) is quoted by Conze as something which, he says, the existentialist just does not believe. On the other hand it constitutes one among a number of indications that Buddhist thought and practice is closely related to the perennial philosophy. Schuon quotes the Mahayana Buddhist

*Lankāvatāra-Sūtra* against those who deny the Absolute (p. 45).

It may be said in parenthesis at this point that both Conze's and Schuon's presentation of Buddhism are of great value in correcting false notions held in the West concerning Buddhism, especially its alleged nihilistic and pessimistic character. It is as a religious tradition that both writers understand it; a tradition, that is, in which the contemplative life holds the central and highest place, and which leads not to destruction or annihilation but to perfection. 'The fact that Buddhism is founded, dialectically and methodically, on the experience of suffering has given rise to criticisms of a kind to be expected in our time, such as the accusation of being "pessimistic", "purely negative", "against nature", and so forth; and this makes it necessary to denounce a double error, firstly that suffering is meaningless, and secondly that suffering can be, not only transcended as Buddhism teaches us, but also abolished on its own level, the level of desire and worldly life.' This is how Schuon understands it, and to this he adds the comment, 'Buddhism is not pessimistic; it is simply aware of the deepest nature of things' (pp. 22f.). What has here and there happened to the Buddhist tradition of spirituality in the West, according to Conze, is that the great exponent of Zen, D. T. Suzuki, unsuspectingly 'fed an Eastern form of spirituality into a predominantly ex-Protestant environment which, having lost all touch with spiritual tradition, gravitated inevitably towards a self-assertive nihilism. Stirred by his message, a vast literature on "Zen" arose in England, France, Italy, Germany and the U.S.A., ranging from positively stuffy and ultra-respectable "square" Zennists to the wild whoopees of Mr Kerouac and his Beatniks' (p. 28). This pseudo-Buddhism of the West Conze sees as the use of the Master's sayings 'to justify a way of life diametrically opposed to the one envisaged by him' (p. 231).

Thus, various writers, Muslim, Buddhist and Catholic, claim that it is to the tradition of spirituality and wisdom that the West must return if it is to survive. What justification can be offered for this claim? For the secularist may make the counter-claim that it is of no importance that the West has dispensed with metaphysics; he may assert that he is equally entitled to his scepticism regarding the possibility or even the need for a metaphysical understanding of the world and of man's place in it. The effects of such scepticism are, however, beginning to be observed by those perfectly capable of putting two and two together. The swing away from science among the young may not be entirely due to the poor teaching of mathematics in secondary schools (an explanation of the phenomenon current among university scientists). Nasr quotes C. F. von Weizsäcker in this connection: 'Skepticism has been the privilege of a few men of learning who could survive because around them stood a world of faith unshaken. Today, skepticism has entered the masses and has rocked the foundation of their order of life. It is the men of

learning who are frightened now' (p. 46). Similarly, Conze refers to Bertrand Russell's dictum that 'the world which Science presents for our belief' is 'purposeless' and 'void of meaning', and comments: 'If Lord Russell had realized that the methods of Science, with a capital S, preclude it from ever recognizing any objective purpose or meaning even if there is one, he might have saved himself much unnecessary worry. Millions of people like him take the conventions and hypotheses of mechanical "Science" for "truths", and are plunged into deep gloom for ever after' (p. 238).

Whether there is any significance in the connexion between the fact that the period in which the West lost sight of what Nasr calls the *sapiential*, and Conze calls the *perennial* world view, and which was characterized by Western dominance of 'heathen' peoples and 'blind' nature, and the fact that this was also characteristically the Protestant period, is a question about which historians may differ. One may at least note that there is a correlation, without seeking to establish causal relationships. Conze and Nasr, however, are less reticent. The former says of Protestantism that 'after first destroying the centres of spiritual contemplation, it has lately lost much of its capacity for restraining and influencing the conduct of individuals and of societies' (p. 82). Nasr draws attention to the fact that 'most of the leading [Protestant] theological trends have dealt with man and history, and have concentrated on the question of the redemption of man as an isolated individual rather than on the redemption of all things' (p. 31). In another place he comments with regard to Protestant theology that it cannot be accidental that it shows 'both a disregard for the study of nature and of comparative religion. Both the cosmos and other religions thus appear as a "natural" domain cut off from the domain of grace with which Christian theology should be concerned' (p. 47). The present writer once heard the principal of a theological college refer to the comparative study of religion as 'Buddhism and all that!' in tones which suggested some surprise that a Christian student should be at all interested in such matters. This kind of attitude indicates not only a failure to show an openness to all the peoples of the earth and their cultures which, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has said, is a *moral* implication of the Gospel; it indicates also the less than total vision of the sphere of salvation which Protestantism has nourished.

It is perhaps no accident that there is a much stronger hostility towards the idea of a *philosophia perennis* among Protestant theologians than among Catholic, as there is also towards anything which is of the nature of mysticism. It is as aspects of this Protestant hostility towards the *philosophia perennis* that both the hostility towards other ('non-Christian') cultures, and the lack of a spiritual understanding of nature can be seen. If the need of the West is to move towards the recovery of an open frontier between the *philosophia perennis* and Christian thought and practice, the rigorous Protestant

attitude is not helpful. Further, it becomes of some importance to enquire into the nature of this hostility (which may not be entirely confined to institutional Protestantism or universally manifested by all branches of Protestantism). On what premises does it rest, and what measure of agreement is there concerning the validity of these premises? There is, for example, a demonstrable lack of unity among biblical scholars regarding the relationship of biblical religion to mysticism. E. J. Tinsley has demonstrated the point in his essay entitled *Parable, Allegory and Mysticism*<sup>1</sup>. Opposition to mysticism, he comments, appears to be a tenet of orthodoxy among certain Old Testament scholars. He quotes examples from the writings of W. Eichrodt, Th. C. Vriezen, L. Koehler, E. Jacob, and S. A. Cook. On the other hand he notes that Ulrich Simon describes Jeremiah as 'the inaugurator of a special form of mysticism', and that T. J. Meek identifies prophetic experience as 'a mystic experience, completely transforming in its character'. '*The prophets were mystics*' [present writer's emphasis] writes Meek, 'and like the mystics they experienced the feeling of transport, of transcendence over things material.' It is interesting to juxtapose Meek's words, 'the prophets were mystics' with those of S. A. Cook, who follows the German line: 'The prophets were not mystics—there is no *unio mystica*—they were intensely realist and rationalist.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, even with regard to the Old Testament the incompatibility of mysticism with biblical religion is something about which theologians cannot agree. This is true *a fortiori* of the New Testament. If there is no unanimity among biblical scholars on the relationship between mysticism and biblical religion, that is, if there is no clear scholarly methodology which can be appealed to to settle the issue, the question arises as to how biblical scholars are led to these opposed opinions, and by what prior assumptions their judgment on this matter is influenced. This is a field where a good deal more research needs to be done.

A similar investigation could be pursued with regard to the question of the alleged incompatibility between the Christ-revelation and the perennial philosophy. The latter, as Conze observes, covers more than mysticism, although the metaphysics of the perennial philosophy may be implied in much mysticism. Conze summarizes the metaphysics as follows: '1. That as far as worthwhile knowledge is concerned not all men are equal, but that there is a hierarchy of persons, some of whom, through what they are, can know much more than others. 2. That there is a hierarchy also of the levels of reality, some of which are more "real" because more exalted than others. 3. That the wise men of old have found a "wisdom" which is true, although it has no "empirical" basis in observations which can be made by everyone and everybody; and that, in fact, there is a

<sup>1</sup>*Vindications*, ed. A. Hanson, London, 1966, pp. 153-192.

<sup>2</sup>*Op. cit.*, pp. 181-3.

rare and unordinary faculty in some of us by which we can attain direct contact with the actual reality—through the *prajñā* (*pāramita*) of the Buddhists, the *logos* of Parmenides, the *sophia* of Aristotle and others . . . and so on. 4. That true teaching is based on an authority which legitimizes itself by the exemplary life and charismatic quality of its exponents' (p. 214).

Perhaps one of the best-known examples of the expression of Christian experience running parallel with the perennial philosophy is the apophatic theology of the fourteenth-century work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In his Foreword to William Johnston's study of the theology of *The Cloud* and of other writings by the same author, Thomas Merton acknowledges that 'the language of apophatism is not peculiar to Christianity', that 'it had currency in Asia long before Christian times', and that it is familiar in the Old Testament. Johnston himself recognizes that 'there is a point of contact in the thought of such widely different personalities as Plato, the author of *The Cloud*, St John of the Cross, Dr Suzuki, and Thomas Merton (p. 264). The knowledge of which *The Cloud* speaks is a supra-conceptual knowledge which 'is incomparably superior to that of discursive reasoning' (p. 90); it is reached 'by voiding the mind of images and concepts, surrounding oneself with a cloud of forgetting . . . not because images and concepts are false, but because they are inadequate and because one is descending to a deeper level of the psyche at which it is easier to contact God' (p. 91). Anyone who is acquainted with the aims and methods of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism, as expounded, for example, by T. R. V. Murti, will immediately notice the striking similarity between these two disciplines of the spiritual life, one Christian, the other Buddhist. Johnston is firm on the point, which anti-mystical theologians might want to deny, that the content, or object of the knowledge spoken of by the author of *The Cloud* is none other than the God who reveals himself in Christ (e.g. pp. 90, 93, 265).

According to *The Cloud* the pursuit of such contemplative practices is the only way to perfection, there being a distinction between *those called to salvation* and *those called to perfection* (p. 262). In the 'hierarchy of ways of life within "Holy Church" the contemplative life alone is allotted the highest position'. It may be noted that in this respect the author of *The Cloud* is in agreement with point 1 of Conze's description of the *philosophia perennis*. With this evaluation of the contemplative life Johnston, however, disagrees. The author of *The Cloud*, he says, 'is a man of his age; he is the child of a medieval world rich in spirituality one might call monastic envisaging Christian perfection only in a contemplative context' (p. 263). Johnston prefers to acknowledge that the contemplative way is one *among other ways* which the Church has come to recognize since 'the opening up of the so-called "New World" and the discovery of continents' (in other words, since about the end of the fifteenth century). 'I believe

that his contemplation is one way to perfection . . . but I do not believe it is the only way' (p. 264).

Once this admission has been made, however, the way has been opened up to all kinds of centrifugal forces, and to that 'loss of spiritual substance' of which Conze writes, or that 'gradual neglect of apophatic and metaphysical theology in favour of a rational theology' which according to Nasr has taken place in Europe (Nasr, p. 37). 'It is the tragedy of our time', writes Conze, 'that so many of those who thirst for spiritual wisdom are forced to think it out for themselves—always in vain. There is no such thing as pure spirituality in the abstract. There are only separate lineages handed down traditionally from the past' (p. 235). Nasr, commenting on 'the cracks' which are beginning to appear in the wall of secular thought warns us against too hastily concluding that this means necessarily a re-assertion of genuine spirituality. 'As a matter of fact most often the walls are filled with the most negative "psychic residues" and the practices of the "occult sciences" which, once cut off from the grace of a living spirituality become the most insidious of influences and are much more dangerous than materialism' (p. 38).

Wherever in the life of a religion the contemplative way is dethroned, there spiritual standards become devalued; this, it would seem is what a Buddhist and a Muslim are saying to us. Where contemplation is not the highest way to perfection, all perfection becomes diluted; it is the contemplative who knows, in a way that is relevant and living for his own generation, what is wisdom. Where there is no vision, the people perish. This, too, is the message of Sisirkumar Ghose's book, which deserves fuller notice than can be given to it here. One can but remark on its perceptive analysis, its clear understanding of the social role of the mystics, and observe the significant fact that from Santiniketan, the home of Tagore, comes this notable confirmation of much that we have had urged upon us by Buddhist and Muslim.

One of the commonest objections to the contemplative life is that it is necessarily *introvertive*. Conze shows repeatedly from the Buddhist point of view that this is not so; 'an individual is unlikely to have the strength to direct his own spiritual destiny'; 'as conceived by both Christians and Buddhists, salvation, or emancipation, must obviously involve the co-operation of the individual with some spiritual force'. Commenting on the tension which is to be found within Buddhism between 'self-power' and 'other-power', Schuon observes that 'in no case must an irreducible opposition be read into either of these expressions of the Buddhist spirit' (p. 122). E. J. Tinsley has shown that in the case of Christian mysticism the contemplative depends upon 'Christ in his mysteries' (*op. cit.*, p. 189). What the mystic sees, writes Professor Tinsley, is 'the permanent paradigmatic character of the historical mission of Jesus'; he sees it not as a series of *past* events, but as 'the classic normative treatment of the transcendental sig-



nificance of man's present existence'. In speaking thus of the paradigmatic character of the historical Jesus, Professor Tinsley would seem to be very close to what could be called the *cosmic* significance of Christ. Recent Western biblical theology has laid heavy emphasis upon the historical dimension of the Christian revelation. It may now be high time to ask whether this interpretation almost exclusively in terms of history and the historical Jesus is the entire essence of the Christian revelation, or whether this emphasis is not to some extent at least due to the intellectual climate of modern Europe, to the influence of evolutionist and historicist<sup>1</sup> schools of thought.

The modern period, the European period, the Protestant period has also been characteristically an *activist* period. Is it possible that with the eclipse of the contemplative life there has also been a serious neglect of the metaphysical understanding of Christ, the cosmic Christ? The Christ of biblical historicism appears to the present writer sometimes to be very much the Christ of rationalism. A number of voices are heard today, some of which we have noted here, urging us to restore contemplative theology to its rightful place, and to recover a proper understanding of the mystic not as a man isolated from society but as one able to provide society with a proper understanding of its nature, and of the things which belong to its peace.

In connexion with this, in the view of the present writer, there is another matter of some importance: the question of the relationship of the eternal Christ and the perennial philosophy is still open, and would bear re-examination.

<sup>1</sup>In the sense in which the word is used by Karl Popper, e.g. in *The Poverty of Historicism*.