

Returning to the Essential

*Introduction by Patrick Laude, Returning to the Essential:
Selected Writings of Jean Biès,
World Wisdom, 2004. 270pp.
Reviewed by Alvin Moore, Jr.*

Some years ago we were preparing for American publication a book by a European traditionalist author when the need arose to consult our betters regarding certain points in the text. The answer came down that the book was probably not worth our attention. Our respectful response was that few men come to instant perfection; that most must struggle long and hard towards this goal, and that as long as this is true there will be some place for the works of authors who enjoy less than the highest degrees of inspiration but whose minds are nearer our own. It has been said that the world does not need more than one Eckhart or Shankara — to which one could certainly add the names of Ibn al-'Arabi and Nagarjuna. But we do need many who themselves are more familiar with such intellectual giants and with traditionalist thinking generally than we are, and who can lead us to better comprehension of these teachings. Jean Biès is such a man and we are not denigrating him to say that he is not a Guénon, a Coomaraswamy, or a Schuon; indeed, he would be the last to claim for himself a rank that is not his own. But he is a perspicacious and articulate writer of more than average intelligence and he has obviously given much thought to the matters he writes about.

Biès was born in 1933 in Bordeaux in southwestern France but spent much of his youth and received his undergraduate education in Algeria where he first encountered a viable Islam. He pursued doctoral studies in the classics at both the University of Algiers and the Sorbonne, and went on to teach at the University of Pau in the French Pyrenees and to write, mostly essays and poetry. He has traveled widely, not from boredom or idle curiosity, but in the pursuit of spiritual understanding. He is

another of those men whose lives have been marked indelibly by an encounter with the works of René Guénon, an encounter which for Biès occurred in 1951, the year of Guénon's death. As a student our author had already discerned that what was being imparted to him in his formal studies were conventional conceptions and not the living truth of things. In the autobiographical first part of this work, he tells of "God's bookshop" and the woman proprietor named Tarini with whom he formed a friendship while still an adolescent. She permitted him to mine her collection for all manner of works and he "read pell-mell the Tibetans, the Hindus, the Persians, Taoist wise men, Zen poets, all the spiritual writings one would expect to find on the shelves of the One who is the real author". Tarini greatly abetted the young Biès' questioning mind, not with an agenda of her own but simply in benevolent response to a gifted young person's open and inquiring intelligence. The young author and teacher-to-be was thus encouraged and confirmed in his approach to a world of ideas far wider and deeper than that commonly accessible to those who consider themselves educated.

Biès does not say explicitly that he is Christian, but many of his statements imply this as does the manner in which he speaks about Christian doctrine and the amount of attention he gives to this and to Christian usages. But his is not a conventional Christian outlook, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant. And this occasions an important observation: in these last times there is a kind of natural movement of a few intelligent minds — seldom with aid from, and usually in spite of, the exoteric authorities — towards an understanding in-depth of Christian doctrine that benefits from the light of the more accessible profundities of other Traditions. This naturally fosters an unwillingness to accept the received constraints of an exoterism that is often narrow, myopic, and even wooden, constraints increasingly perceived as simply irrelevant. Yet the fundamental formal elements of Christianity are recognized by this inchoate elite as God-given, and the Church in its various orthodox branches is recognized as legitimate custodian and conservator of the essentials of the Christian Tradition. Church leaders would do well to take note of this development because of its possibly great significance for the Church: for paradoxically, it could herald a more potent Christianity. In any event the unquestioning acceptance of parochial shortsightedness continues to diminish as a consequence of these last times

wherein everything is juxtaposed as never before, and when there is an inundation of information of every kind, including much admirable material amidst a plethora of rubbish. In any event, there are men such as Biès whose Christian faith synthesizes some familiarity with universal doctrine found in the *Upanishads*, in elements of the Buddhist canon, even in the *Tao-te-king* and the *Holy Qur'an*, not in a syncretistic manner but in the recognition of principles that are common to all traditions but expressed according to the genius of each. Faith such as this cannot be forced back into the narrow mold of a "common sense" understanding of the Christian *mythos* — a word, incidentally, that is intended to signify the highest possibilities of articulation, that which borders on the inexpressible. Willy-nilly, there is a quasi-natural, or better, "naturally supernatural", movement towards esoterism. Biès personifies this movement.

In the lines that follow we will try to elaborate on passages where, as it seems to us, some comment may contribute to greater understanding of what Biès says; or, where it seems advisable, to criticize what he says. We hope in this way to convey something of the character and merits of the book. In the chapter, "Evenings at La Fragnière", he writes of a woman older than himself, Thyra, a crypto-Buddhist, by whom he was influenced. He tells of her interesting conviction (with which he apparently agrees) "...that there is no absolute separation between life and death...our ancestors play a part in this life". This affirmation could as well be Taoist, for Lao-tzu wrote that "there is no difference between the living and the dead; both are one channel of vitality". In other times and locales, or with a more adequate traditional anthropology, such sound conceptions of man's psychic or subtle nature would be much more accessible, could shed much light on human relations, on the individual's post-mortem destiny, on "ancestor worship", as well as on the erroneous notions of "reincarnation". There does seem to be a far greater awareness of psychic or subtle life among older families and in older and more stable cultures. It is we moderns with our highly exaggerated nominalism, we who are far advanced in materialist "solidification", for whom the separation between the living and the dead seems especially stark and who conceive of death as an utter finality.

We also learn that Thyra used the *Bardo Thödol*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Whatever the degree of her penetration of Buddhism — and it seems to us improbable that this could have been especially profound on

the part of a European living in the Valais, far from any Buddhist ambience – her case stands as an example of westerners neglecting their own traditions in favor of the exotic which doubtless seem to offer greater possibilities than commonplace Christianity, but which also offer far greater pitfalls for the unwary. Such people ignore the traditional form best suited to their character as westerners. The major branches of Christianity have always had their prayers for the dead. In Latin Christianity (as it existed prior to Vatican II) each of the canonical hours closed with a remembrance of the dead. There was the Requiem Mass, obviously consisting of prayers for the deceased; and following the Mass for the actual day of burial there were Masses for the third, seventh, and thirtieth days after interment, plus anniversary Masses. The old Roman Requiem Mass reminded us that *vita mutatur, non tollitur*, "life is changed, not taken away". For those deemed already worthy to stand before God, the Roman Church considered the day of their death as their *dies natalis* or day of birth into a life infinitely better than the present. What is death on the one side is ineluctably birth on the other, though we are told that "a great gulf is fixed" between them.

There is nevertheless a positive lesson to be learned from the *Bardo Thödol*: namely, the importance of the dying person's state of mind – something Biès reminds us that all healthy traditions have stressed. We moderns, however, seek above all to avoid pain and even discomfort and prefer to die in drugged oblivion, at risk to our life *outré tombe*. "As ye are found, so shall you be lead away", an eastern liturgy tells us. And a widely used theme in medieval popular art was the contest between the archangel St Michael and the Devil for the soul of the dying.

The chapter "Debate of a Thought" contains a section that merits quoting at some length because of its great importance for western man's self-understanding. Biès writes (pp 69, 70) that Aristotle:

deals with metaphysics and Platonic 'ideas'. He adheres to the existence of a God who is the motor of the universe, entirely 'substance' in actuality, thorough and perfect; *but* he formulates a theory of the concept that is no longer metaphysical but logical. His 'realism' is that of sensory objects, refusing to separate the essence from the thing itself. He brings metaphysics back to ontology; and the entire history of Western metaphysics will be marked, preventing it henceforth – barring exceptions – from belonging to *philosophia perennis*. This *reduction* brought about an abstract and theoretical conception of knowledge, resulting in modern intellectualism, unknown to any 'experience'. God becomes a Principle separated

from the world (before completely disappearing from the human horizon and human concerns). Thomas Aquinas will study this same separation that Descartes will definitively confirm. Rational understanding will replace metaphysical intuition.

In Bies' words is found an essential key to the fatal divergence of western intellectuality, not only from its own roots but also from that of the intellectuality of other major civilizations of the world.

Some years ago the Patriarch of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, whose See is at Damascus, publicly and forcibly stated that Christians are as entirely monotheist as are Muslims. Biès, for his part, has some precious insights into and observations on the doctrine of the Trinity. The popular Christian prejudice that the Persons of the Trinity are discrete individuals is as fully erroneous as the popular Muslim prejudice that Christians are tritheists. Biès, referring to teachings of Sts. Basil the Great and Maximus the Confessor, states that the *three* in the Trinity "...is not a number: the divine Persons are not added up, they exist in each other. There is a circulation of Unity, *perichoresis*, wherein each Person only exists by its relationship to the others", which renders clearer St Thomas Aquinas' teaching that the Persons of the Trinity are pure relationships. It has also been taught that the Trinity is an "arrangement of God", a kind of "theodicy" in view of the perspectives of *this* world, and particularly in view of the Incarnation. Biès' arguments are reinforced by the statement of another contemporary Orthodox hierarch to the effect that the Persons of the Trinity are "faces" turned towards or "voices" addressed to believers. This brings to mind Meister Eckhart's statement that even if there were a hundred persons in the Godhead, there would still be only one God, as well as the Kabbalist doctrine of the ten uncreated *Sephiroth*, which doctrine in no manner compromises the Divine Unity. God is undoubtedly simple, but his simplicity is infinitely rich. It is reflected, for example, in the *Divine Names* of St Dionysius, the "divine Qualities" of Sufism, as well as in Palamite theology's "uncreated Energies" which constitute the unique Origin and End of every existent thing.

Biès does not neglect what today would be labeled as "psychology", and much of what he says merits respect and attention. But more caution is needed when he writes that "...they [the Eastern doctrines] will show us that the 'I' is only an everchanging, elusive, evanescent and unreal aggregate composed of habits, faculties, dispositions and tendencies

without fixedness". This characterization of the 'I' has only a limited validity, applicable to man's psychophysical nature, that is, the corporeal and subtle elements in human nature. This is true insofar as it refers to the empirical ego, to what is conventionally accepted as one's "personal identity" in *this* life, but it is definitely not true of the *personality* and is a dangerous ellipsis if understood as descriptive of perduring human nature. If it were true, the dissolution of the body would herald either immediate liberation or annihilation and the statement of Lao-tzu cited above would make no sense whatever; nor would traditional teachings on the post-mortem destiny of the soul. We could learn from the earlier Christian and notably Pauline conceptions of human nature: that man consists of *corpus, anima, et Spiritus* — body, soul, and Spirit. These categories: gross, subtle, and formless, correspond to the three main categories of the created order, the macrocosm; for man is a *microcosm*, a miniature cosmos. As a near contemporary German cardinal put it: "Man consists of body, soul, and Holy Spirit". In any event, it is "the Spirit that giveth life; the flesh [ie, body and soul, the gross and subtle elements in the human composite] profiteth nothing" (*John* vi, 63). It follows, then, that in traditional anthropology (and all traditions are in agreement, *mutatis mutandis*) any remotely adequate understanding of man must consider not only his corporeal and subtle elements, but also the formless (or angelic) and Principial states. Man in his created nature is threefold, but *in toto*, he is at least fourfold. In the *Vedanta*, which offers a complete anthropological doctrine (see René Guénon's *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*), individuality extends far beyond man's corporeal modality. And in Christianity the journey inwards from the body to the formless realm within (to the Kingdom of God) described by Dante in the *Purgatorio*, extends through many modalities and degrees of the individual state all the way up to the Earthly Paradise. Only with enfranchisement into the Earthly Paradise, the term of the Lesser Mysteries, can the redeemed pass beyond form which characterizes individuality as such. These things are worth mention because adequate theory is an essential prerequisite to spiritual realization, and if one's readers are to be well served they must be advised not only of beginning and end but of the intermediate states as well, which are often very complex.

At this point let us note that Biès cites two suspect authors who at the

very least completely lack any traditional pedigree: Carl Jung, and Alan Watts, neither of whom adhered to any specific tradition which is a *sine qua non* for anyone who would speak with any authority of spiritual things, and both of whom were at best dilettantes in traditional matters. He also cites a third dubious authority: Sri Aurobindo Ghose, the Teilhard de Chardin of Hinduism. There seems to be no doubt that Sri Aurobindo was the beneficiary of some degree of realization, but it appears that his writings may have been "doctored" by some in his entourage in order to bring them into line with modern notions of "evolutionary progress", notions which are completely antithetical to genuine metaphysics in which ultimately all things must be viewed in perfect simultaneity, thus rendering evolution completely null and void intellectually.

Biès' Christian sympathies are evident in his lucid chapter on iconography. "The icon sanctifies the gaze of the one who looks at it.... Free from... sensualism, it inaugurates the 'fasting of the eyes'.... As a support for meditation it stabilizes and brings order to 'the mental and psychic currents'"; and Biès reminds us that "man becomes what he contemplates". He writes also on deification, reminding us of a favored but elliptical dictum of the Greek fathers: "God became man that man might become God", a statement seldom mentioned in these last times and even less often understood and given its due. Biès underlines the quasi-absolute distinction between deification and divinization; in connection with the latter we may recall that when Lucifer sought to be "like unto God" he became Satan. Divinization is the apotheosis of the ego, of an illusion, of an ephemera; it implies separation. Deification, on the other hand, involves a thoroughgoing renunciation of self (*denegat seipsum* is advice given all who would follow Christ), of the ego, an utter *vacare Deo*; it involves communion and virtual identification.

Another brief citation is in order here; it is too important to ignore though too axiomatic to need comment. Biès asks rhetorically (pp 196, 197):

Do we really need to point out that with the contingent world being the reflection of the 'Order from above', the rejection of this 'Order' — because man is free to conform to it or dismiss it — can only lead to the destruction of the reflection itself without affecting the 'Order' at all? The only solution is in accepting this obvious fact and rediscovering this 'Order'... [the] return to Unity is an obvious return to the Essential. And it is this return to the Essential that will make it possible for the Essential to return.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to esoterism, especially Christian esoterism and the Primordial Tradition. The author articulates many insights that will be precious for those who seek to deepen their understanding of the Christian tradition – which understanding, as we have said before, can frequently benefit from collateral light from other traditions. After citing the testimonies of St. Justin Martyr, Origen, St. Irenaeus, St. Maximus the Confessor, and Nicolas of Cusa (and there are numerous others), all to the effect that the Word is common to all, Biès writes that:

If St. Paul wants us to refuse the messages that do not come from Christ, it is not because they are all necessarily untrue, but because the message of Christ, as much by its content as by its expression, is the most adapted to the Westerners of the time and their descendants.

Yet in a kind of irony of these last times we find that participation in our own tradition is often rendered easier and more compelling by an increased understanding of other traditions. This is truer today than ever before: on the one hand because of the decay of Christianity; on the other and by way of Providential compensations in the form of extra-Christian conceptions that are more ample both in breadth and in depth. But this is not all: if the contents of the several traditional forms themselves differ, as Biès mentions, this is because the infinite richness of the Uncreated cannot be exhausted by any one Credo. The elements of this or that Credo, however, do not stand alone in splendid isolation; they, too, reflect realities; they too have referents and exist because of these referents; and the referents themselves point to the One. It is analogous to the spokes of a wheel which converge as they approach the hub, but are at their maximum separation at the outer rim. In these last times, when we approach a final discrimination, perhaps we will discover that our real friends are not so much where we have thought and our real enemies are not where we have feared.

As for this translation itself, it is adequate but one gets the impression that it was done in haste or that the task had grown wearisome to the translator – which, if so, is perfectly understandable. In any event, the English text could profit from review and revision in order to iron out a number of unwieldy renderings and clarify minor uncertainties. We did not find any passages, however, that suggest real confusion or infidelity to meanings, though we have not seen the French text. Throughout the

translation the two rather awkward terms *esotericism* and *exotericism* are used rather than the more widely current, apt, and more sonorous *esoterism* and *exoterism*. We recommend the book, though it would be well if the reader could approach it from a background of some familiarity with the major traditional writers.