

# Letter to the Editor: Confessions of a Lutheran Perennialist

By Larry Rinehart

I write as a Christian of Lutheran order, who returned to the Church on the threshold of the seventh decade of life, having been led by the teachings of *Philosophia Perennis* to see the creedal and sacramental tenets of the faith of my youth in that new and ancient Light. From the teachings of Guenon and others, I first believed it would be necessary to seek confirmation in either the Roman or Eastern orders of the Church, but in due time I encountered the views of Frithjof Schuon<sup>1</sup> regarding the spiritual adequacy of the Lutheran order. It also became clear to me, however, that while most Perennialists regard Schuon's spiritual authority as virtually supreme, on this point there was significant disagreement. Rama Coomaraswamy, and a number of other writers, took the position that the apostolic succession of bishops, along with a particular interpretation of the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharistic rite, is essential for the sacramental validity of the latter, and thus for its adequacy as a basis for esoteric spiritual practice. According to Schuon, the Lutheran branch of the Church derives its legitimacy not from apostolic succession but from a mandate of Heaven, a providential intervention by the Holy Spirit introducing a new perspective (*darshana*) upon Scripture and tradition, and initiating a third Christian *upaya* alongside the Roman and the Eastern.

While the chief point of this letter is simply to call attention to the possibility of esoteric spiritual practice within the 'third branch' of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, it places that possibility within the biographical context of its personal realization by the writer; from the religious background of youth, through decades of outright apostasy, to the

<sup>1</sup> "The Question of Evangelicalism" in *Christianity/Islam* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington IN, orig 1985) but see new edition; "Christian Divergences" in *In the Face of the Absolute* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington IN, 1989). Further references to Schuon's work refer to these articles.

discovery of *Philosophia Perennis* and the quest for a valid religious basis.

Born of a Pennsylvania-German father whose family had long been Lutheran, and a Scots-Irish Presbyterian mother (whose own mother had grown up Moravian), baptized by Lutheran rite in the spring of 1946, I was raised in a relatively pious Christian household. As a teenager I was catechized according to Luther's Small Catechism (as was Schuon), and confirmed in the faith at one Calvary Evangelical Lutheran church. I was not an angelic teenager: pride, anger and lust were my constant companions—but so was my Christian faith, which I took quite seriously. When it was time to choose a college, I opted for a Lutheran-affiliated institution.

But neither the affiliation of my College with the Lutheran church, nor the presence of a chapel on its campus, were sufficient to avert the most ironic impact upon my religious life. Exposure to secular-critical analyses of the Holy Scriptures, which effectively corroded their sacred meaning and destroyed their intellectual integrity, quickly freed my mind of any concern with attending chapel. I began hatching a 'mystical' outlook of essentially literary inspiration: now I was a sort of spiritual "loner", destined to try and figure out the great mystery the best I could—in short, I had become a typical "modern man". As a chemistry major and budding chemist, I also associated a "mystical" dimension with natural science, though without any conscious association with the spiritual tradition in which I had been reared. In my senior year I took courses in "Contemporary Religious Thought" and "Theology and Literature" under a scion of the Divinity School of a prestigious University. In these courses, concluding my spiritual formation at College, I learned that there was no theological consensus regarding religious matters, and that modern literature comprised a veritable new revelation from which theological mysteries could be divined.

In the course of these studies I had found the relations of science and religion a topic I wished to explore; so, with chemistry degree in hand, I entered Seminary the following autumn to pursue an "academic ministry". In the two years of my sojourn there, I studied a variety of literary and philosophical writings, including those of Kant, Whitehead and Camus; as well as the latest fashions in theological discourse (hope, process, liberation, etc). At the same time, by way of the writings of Norman O Brown, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder and others, I was becoming aware that other great spiritual traditions, besides the Christian, possessed knowledge and truth adequate to the salvation of souls. I grew increasingly troubled over the Church's claim to exclusivity of the means of salvation. Even then, I considered that Christ's declaration—"No one cometh to the

Father but by me”—could well refer to His divine nature as archetypal Logos; and moreover, that this Logos could manifest to humanity in other ways than as Christ Jesus. Did He not also say he had “other sheep, who are not of this fold”?

In any case, as neither College nor Seminary had caused me to encounter *Philosophia Perennis*, it was over the Christian claim to exclusivity that, after a rather exorbitant second year in Seminary, I departed both the Seminary and the Church. I was making Exodus from the Church itself, because I knew its exclusivity claim to be false, in a vaguely-conceived gesture of solidarity with non-Christians. Yet I still lacked a basic perspective in which to survey the planetary *pleroma* of mythological and theological forms with which I had pledged solidarity in leaving the Church. Enter the hermit of Bollingen, Carl Gustav Jung: ignorant of the perennial Wisdom, I sought spiritual anchorage in the shoals of “depth psychology”.

I believed Jung’s perspective was the key to the spiritual unity of the vast planetary thesaurus of sacred symbols; overlooking his Kantian truncation of cosmic and human nature at the plane of psyche, which renders Spirit (and spirit) inconceivable. I also overlooked the sinister thrust of his doctrine of evil, to which he affords equal ontological status with Good (no mere *privatio boni*) in explicit contradiction of tradition, and which generates an ethics of accepting the ‘dark side’ rather than struggling with it for the sake of Light.<sup>2</sup> (This suited my ego just fine.) I was also fascinated with his idea that the transition from the Piscean aeon to the Aquarian—generally assigned to the 21st century—symbolized the passing of the dominance of Christ (the Fish), and the advent of a new revelation, inclusive of the whole planetary religious heritage. With the tomes of Jung at one hand, and the mythological compilations of Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade at the other, I believed I stood ready to participate in the envisionment of the Aquarian revelation. I had completed the metamorphosis from traditional Christian to critical modern, and in that state had stumbled into the New Age.

The political component of the Aquarian vision that beguiled me owed much to ‘liberation theology,’ which is essentially the attempt to base a Christian theology of social justice on the teachings of Marx rather than those of the Church, despite this militantly atheistic ideology’s role in the martyrdom of millions of Christians (and other faithful religious peoples). But the ultimate form of my fantasy was a vision of the Green movement as a new kind of spiritual politics, uniting care for Creation with issues of social justice, and ultimately establishing a whole new

<sup>2</sup> See Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*.

political order in the wake of ecological-geopolitical “apocalypse.” In all of this I somehow overlooked the End of Time, the Last Day; and the Lord who then shall return.

Such, more or less, was the mental horizon I inhabited for more than thirty years, from my early twenties into my middle fifties, allowing for some development over those decades. But quite suddenly, in the first years of the 21st century, a number of circumstances combined to fracture in my mind the façade of modern “civilization” and its ideologies. It was at this point that Guénon’s *East and West* came into my hands, and shortly thereafter, his *Crisis of the Modern World*.

I have often pondered how different my intellectual life would have been, had I encountered Guénon and Schuon in my twenties, instead of Jung. And I have wondered why the Lord let me wander in the wilderness of the New Age for three decades, and did not overwhelm me with the ray of perennial Wisdom until the middle of my sixth decade of life. Did my own stubborn pride in the way I had chosen, need so long to be broken down by the lessons of life, before that illuminating ray could penetrate the shell of ego, to my heart? As the Sufis say, God knows best.

In any case I commenced an intensive study of the works of Guénon, Schuon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, along with those of a number of other Perennialist writers<sup>3</sup>; and various traditional teachings including Tibetan Buddhist, Kashmiri Shaiva, the *Holy Koran* and the *Holy Bible*. The teachings of the non-Christian texts, in the Light of *Philosophia Perennis*, were instrumental in leading me back to the Church, my ‘exodus issue’ having been resolved.

The next question however, was which branch of the Church I was to enter. I plunged into the works of Martin Luther, side by side with texts of the ancient Fathers, and books both Eastern and Western on the Prayer of Jesus and the invocation of the Name<sup>4</sup>. In essence I lived as a “Lutheran hermit” for several years, initiated according to Lutheran rites, following a simple rule of prayer, including the Name, in conjunction with spiritual reading. I had in effect returned to the Church by an inward path, and had not yet found my way to an outward and visible congregation. Given the controversy over the validity of the Lutheran *upaya*, I was intent on giving due consideration to the Roman and Eastern orders; but given the

<sup>3</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Martin Lings, Titus Burkhardt, Rama Coomaraswamy, Charles Upton, Jean Bies, Wolfgang Smith; and more recently Mateus Soares de Azevedo and William Stoddart.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninoff, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (St John of Kronstadt Press, Liberty TN, 1995); Rama P Coomaraswamy, *The Invocation of the Name of Jesus*, (Fons Vitae, Louisville KY, 1999).

complex and uncertain ecclesiology of the traditional Roman order in resistance to the official hierarchy, the way across the Bosphorus seemed to me better marked than the way across the Tiber. The question thus became, Lutheran or Eastern?

My wife, who was delighted to find me ready to rejoin the Church, accompanied me for a period of 10 months in alternately worshipping with an Antiochan Orthodox congregation in our area, and one of several Lutheran congregations. In addition we attended catechumen classes with the Orthodox priest and studied again the Lutheran Confessions; while I did additional reading on the subject of Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue, beginning with the correspondence between Tubingen and Constantinople in the late 16th century. The upshot of this intensive ecumenical dialectic was that it grew increasingly clear to my wife and me that we were not called to the Eastern church. We indeed came to love the beauty and spiritual power of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, and we always felt we were fully worshipping with the congregation—exclusion from the Eucharist aside. But there were certain aspects of Eastern practice that finally felt so alien to us, that we could not see ourselves in that congregation: call it a question of ‘religious climate’, in Schuon’s phrase. I was reminded of the latter’s comments on a tendency of the “Germanic soul” towards “a piety that was non-monastic,” and on “a tendency in the Gospel which answers with particular force the needs of the Germanic soul: namely the tendency towards simplicity and inwardness, and thus contrary to ... dispersion of worship ...” In any case, the die was cast: I would not be crossing Tiber nor Bosphorus, but pitching my tent in Augsburg, and casting my lot with the Lutherans, as I believe the Lord has led me to do, and as my wife has happily agreed. Rama Coomaraswamy once wrote to me that, in the end, it is “Christ speaking in the heart” that one must heed.

In the course of arriving at these convictions, I remembered that Seyyed Hossein Nasr had mentioned Luther in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, and reviewing the relevant pages, found his assertion that “Lutheran spirituality ... allowed the possibility of a mysticism of an essentially sapiential nature.”<sup>5</sup> In a letter of August 2009, Dr Nasr has graciously confirmed that he stands with Schuon on this question, and that “Lutheranism *does* provide the sufficient cadre for the practice of such esoteric forms of prayer even if it does not possess the theological and liturgical richness of traditional Catholicism and Orthodoxy.”<sup>6</sup> I had also noted several refer-

<sup>5</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1989), page 26.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted with permission of Dr Nasr.

ences by another Perennialist author, Mateus Soares de Azevedo<sup>7</sup>, to the category “traditional Protestants” among Christian Perennialists, and upon writing him, received another affirmative letter, headed by the *Shabadah* in Latin (*Nullus Deus nisi Deus*), with regard to the Protestant option: “*Spiritus ubi vult spirat*”.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Sr Soares de Azevedo referred me to William Stoddart, whom I had known only for his marvelous translations of Schuon’s late teaching poems. On contacting Dr. Stoddart, a disciple of Schuon’s since 1950, I was delighted to learn that he too, unequivocally supports the Lutheran, and more broadly the traditional Protestant communions, as an adequate “vehicle for a spiritual way inspired by the *Sophia Perennis*”.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Gray Henry of Fons Vitae, with whom I had spoken a number of times regarding this question, has also expressed her agreement on the possibility of esoteric spiritual practice among Protestant Christians.<sup>10</sup>

While there is doubtless more to be said on the topic, it must suffice in the confines of this letter to have called attention to the possibility of esoteric spiritual practice within the Reformation branch of the Church. There may be other souls within the Protestant communions whose faith may be saved from the corrosions of late modernity, by access to the perennial Wisdom, yet who could not readily adapt to the religious climates of Rome and the East. Moreover, the presence of a scattering of Perennialist spirituals within the Reformation communions might be providential for the third branch of the Church, as the times continue to darken, and the wolves disguise themselves ever more subtly, as sheep. Indeed we are forewarned about the prevalence of false teachings in the Last Days, and the discernment of spirits at work in the outward and visible churches of the Church demands the foremost vigilance of which every believer is capable.

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<sup>7</sup> “Sages and Saints of our Epoch in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy”, in Mateus Soares de Azevedo, ed, *Ye Shall Know the Truth*, (World Wisdom: Bloomington IN, 2005), p 277; and “Esoterism and Exoterism in the Sermon on the Mount”, in *Sophia*, Volume 15, No 1 (Summer 2009), p 148.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted with permission of Sr Soares de Azevedo.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted with permission of Dr Stoddart.

<sup>10</sup> In private conversation.