

# PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS IN THE BOSNIAN SPIRIT

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*As part of a general project to broaden the base of “philosophy” to include more and more of the intellectual traditions of the East, the Nanzan Institute is pleased to reproduce the following essay by Nevad Kahteran, associate professor in Comparative Philosophy and the History of Eastern Philosophy at the University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was composed during a recent stay in Japan as a visiting scholar at Kyoto University under the auspices of the Japan Foundation.*

Painstaking efforts, over many years, to penetrate to the very core of oriental philosophy and Qur’anic teachings on the universality of revelation, expressed through an identification of the supreme Unity in which all formal differences are resolved, provide the certain background to this paper. For to one who is acquainted with all the Words that were sent down in the last revelation from the Heavens, that is to a hafiz-e Qur’an, the encounter with the philosophical traditions of the Orient was no cause for malaise. Quite the contrary, through this encounter this Islamic, universalist perspective acquired additional potential to draw on its own strengths and rise above the formal constraints of diverse philosophical and theological, cultural and civilizational matrices. Hence, to those that come fearlessly and without vanity to this encounter, the perennial teachings, of which the original foundations and origins are to be found in the revealed Word of God, make it imperative to avoid falling into certain “philosophies of the herd” and provincialism at a time when what is most important is to reaffirm the universality of perspective of its original, authentic impulse. Furthermore, this perspective is so emphatically present in the Qur’an that it is inherent to the Islamic tradition; indeed, in accordance with the standpoint advanced by the thinkers of our choice, universalism is in fact, in the deepest sense, the very *raison d’être* of Islam.

What is more, this wisdom is to be found everywhere, and at one and the same time overarches and brings together the scattered and dispersed. It is neither of the East nor of the West in its nature, but universal, and is implicitly present in these religious complexities. On the threshold of the third millennium, however, it is more than ever clear that the human species is turning towards the inner spiritual dimension of man, attempting anew to attain this founding principle of the traditional perspective of unity-in-diversity (*al-wahdah fi'l-kathrah*) and diversity-in-unity (*al-kathrah fi'l-wahdah*), principles that are the very knowledge of the core of the traditional model of thinking. But there is a malaise in this endeavour of modern man: he is striving to acquire knowledge of this kind, but in so doing centres himself on man, and not on God, on that inviolable holy Centre that is neither of the East nor of the West. Thus, in remaining within the domain of the human, he is incapable of understanding the complexity of Reality, which within this world-view must always be designated with an initial capital letter, contrary to its understanding within modern and postmodern “profane philosophies.”

For Bosnia and Herzegovina that wisdom is now more than ever necessary, both from the philosophical and intellectual and from the practical point of view. Thus the renewed discovery of the perennial wisdom, as we have already sufficiently underlined in this paper, is also of major practical importance; to those who resolve to follow these teachings, however, who are its advocates, the aim is certainly not merely practical. In conformity with the teachings themselves, the practical aspect in fact derives from the Truth itself.

In this perennial perspective the audience encounters a heritage that they share with humanity as a whole, through the ever newly renewed reflection of that same Reality. Permit us at this point to refer to one of the most famous texts from the entire Rig Veda corpus (I.164.46), which in speaking of this says, “the Essence is one; sages give it many names...” (*Ekam sad, viprā vadanti*). Hence this teaching is linked in the most explicit manner with the Primordial and Universal Tradition (*Philosophia Perennis, Lex Aeterna, Hagia Sophia, Din al-Haqq, Dhamma, Tao, Sanatana Dharma*), as these expressions have already been used in diverse traditions of which René Guénon, and after him Frithjof Schuon and S. H. Nasr, as well as many others, have written with such dedication.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, this supra-formal synthesis cannot be transmuted into the terminology of formal syncretism, while on the contingent existential plane each traditional form possesses its own inexorable laws, logic and integral cohesion

1. It is worth noting that James W. Heisig in his *Philosophers of Nothingness* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) refers to his 'work as “an account of the reassessment” required by taking into account the coincidence of efforts over the past two decades to reassess the Kyoto school and its place in the intellectual history of this world (p. 3) and to link it to perennial philosophy (p. 17).

in conformity with the time, place and nation involved, to the exclusion of other forms. In living faithfully within a given form, man lives all of them simultaneously, since he resides in his own form and at his own level of belonging to the whole, which is identical, by analogical transposition, with the Supreme Centre. This is in fact the essence of Frithjof Schuon's interpretation of orthodoxy.

Here, though, we are once again faced with the question that inevitably arises in relation to this concept of the perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*): people differ according to whether they are more inclined to similarity or to difference. Furthermore, perennialists are people who are exceptionally sensitive to that which is common, which brings into focus these similarities, while simultaneously rejecting differences and confrontation through the notion of "esoteric ecumenism." Drawn by its influence, they discover these signs of the dispersed, that is they perceive similarities everywhere. But as regards these reciprocities and differences, we must say that *stricto sensu* they depend largely on the angle of vision of the observer.

We have observed this wisdom, bestowed in the eternal heritage for the life of the world and laid down as the enduring foundation of all the revealed religious traditions, as personified in three founding, crucial personalities who are essential for its true understanding: René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, university professor from George Washington University, only one who is still alive among them.<sup>2</sup> In their view, there is knowledge independent of time, authentic and accessible as *sophia perennis* and *religio perennis*, uninterrupted and ever one, that is, knowledge that preserves within itself one and the same unalterable essence.

Guénon, Schuon, and Nasr are traditional, not traditionalist, thinkers, who spoke and speak of Tradition in general; of the Truth that survives and manifests itself at the heart of every authentic religious tradition; of the universality of the Truth (similarly to the *theory of indeterministic truth, of the toleration of many modes of truth*, of the most original Indian philosopher of the past century, K. C. Bhattacharya, whose philosophy is founded on the Jain teachings known as the *anekānta-vāda*, or the theory of the polyvalence of truth; of the differences between Tradition and modernism, which is in fact a negation of Tradition and in general of the principles by which mankind lived for millennia). These three perennialists have published their most significant works on the Muslim way of religiosity, under the aegis of and with the assistance of the most important teachings of the Islamic tradition, striving to discover and identify the values of the universal and unique Tradition that conceptually precedes, and in its origins transcends, all subsequent derivations, particular doctrines and regular religious

2. See S. H. Nasr, 『イスラムの哲学者』 [Islamic philosophers], transl. by T. Kuroda, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1975.

paths—searching, that is, for the unity of all metaphysical traditions. They have also written extensively on the Sacred, that has always been the source of unity, existence, and certainty. The Sacred, however, is no longer a regulatory force in modern societies. Whole sectors of culture and of life, including religion, art and science, have been desacralized in modern societies. The individual is born into a social and cultural environment that inhibits his access to higher levels of reality. He is spiritually impoverished and limited in his attempts to understand the Ultimate Reality, for secularization has created a cultural atmosphere such that it cannot tolerate even the existence of the notion of “revealed truth.”

According to Guénon, Schuon, and Nasr, the three prominent thinkers we consider in this paper, the perennial wisdom can offer a perspective on an entire intellectual undertaking, as on life itself. *Sophia perennis* is not merely a discipline, nor a pure “ism,” but a world-view that not only offers a viewpoint on intellectual disciplines but also contributes to daily life itself. In fact, traditionalists believe that *sophia perennis*, far from being a modern innovation, is the eternal wisdom that changes in form but never in essence.

In this short paper we have endeavored to discern to what extent the modern world, superficially at least, has eliminated certain sacral characteristics of traditional culture, since rationalism signifies the negation of metaphysical knowledge, which is of a suprarational order, and modern philosophy is unable to acknowledge the existence of true metaphysics without bringing about its own self-destruction. On the one hand, we have tried to demonstrate that the Enlightenment shifted the field of interest from traditional values to those of scientific character, relying on the autonomy of reason and on technical progress, while on the other hand our intention has been to show that *sophia perennis* sets out to transcend the modern paradigm, since modernism has reduced human perception to a single dimension. We have consistently emphasized the traditionalists’ assertion that the endeavours of modern philosophy and psychology to restrict the human capacity for understanding to the physical level have implicitly severed the potential for cognition and recognition of the hierarchical dimension of Reality. Thus, instead of a hylomorphic structure, man is here represented as a theomorphic structure, where contrary to the profane, mono-dimensional world-view, a hierarchical structure is displayed, in which Heaven and Earth are not two distinct concepts and where there is no rupture between the world of transcendence and the world of immanence. But for modern man, who persists in his disjunction between these two, the world is an undivided entity that has nothing to do with transcendence.

Contrary to this, the traditional interpretation of the *philosophia perennis* views the Divine Reality as the source of the millennial religions that regulated human lives throughout their history until just a few centuries ago. However, this Divine Reality is above any conceptualization. In addition to this primordial

concept of the Absolute (the Absolute is Transcendent, above time and space in Its unalterability and plenitude), we have sought in particular to show that the metaphysics of the perennial philosophy are founded not merely on that hierarchy of universal existence, but also on the distinction between the external and the internal, between form and meaning, between phenomenon and noumenon. However, whatever language is used here, whether oriental or occidental, our perennialists are aware that the distinction is universal and inevitable (actually, this is identification of the distinction that Schuon makes within the Divine Principle between the Absolute as such and the “relative Absolute”).

To be in harmony with previous religious traditions, therefore, is the explicit characteristic of *sophia perennis*, the eternal wisdom (the Arabic notion of *al-hikma al-khalida*, or *sanatana dharma* of the Hindus), a concept that has constantly played a significant role in Islam, whether as an exoteric model for cultural and religious pluralism, or as an esoteric treasury for mystics. But the Divine Spirit blows equally through all traditions. For how else is one to understand that “the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3.8).

Like all works of extraordinary breadth, the works of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and S. H. Nasr can be subjected to diverse interpretations. The methods of participation in their works are necessarily different. This is all the more marked in their case in the light of the divergences that exist between the concepts of the *philosophia/sophia perennis* and those of modern philosophy, or in other words between divinely inspired knowledge on the one hand, and wisdom of purely human character on the other. Although their presentation of traditional models of thought may appear to the modern recipient as an anti-Western stance, it is not so. On the contrary, what is in question here is a powerful critique of modernity in all its manifestations. As a result, the perennialists believe that it is only from this point of view that it is possible truly to realize the idea of the plural unity of Europe, and of the world as a whole.

Here we come to a paradoxical situation, in view of the context of events and contemporary circumstances that have taken place in the locus within which the elements of this “Bosnian school of thought” were developed (“a land of endless inspiration,” in the words of a dear friend). Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of its components dismembered and fragmented, is now again regarded as fertile ground for religious pluralism and understanding between all the sacred forms of the Abrahamic family of religions, but not only these. A critique of the cardinal modernist sin, obsession with the ego, the apotheosis of individuality, is inescapable when blazing the trails of perennial wisdom in Bosnia, not as an anti-Western stance, but as an expression of concern and trepidation for the likely future of humanity as a whole. It is not for us to assess how far we have

been successful in this regard, since this paper may perhaps serve as an initial base to those who will follow us on this path. Also, the premise I am studying, and on which I lay great emphasis throughout, is that the eastern philosophies are true philosophy, not just a philosophy of a specific and esoteric nature for which we make use of non-philosophical instruments, as is the norm when these philosophies are addressed. I am assuming in advance, of course, that one of the points that strikes the many who, for the most part, have been educated within Western tradition, is the recognition of how similar, and yet how different, these traditions are. So, my intention is to attempt to bring to light some part of the immensity of the philosophical tradition of the East, and especially its Japanese contributions. For the eastern philosophical traditions are such a fascinating subject that to study them pays handsome intellectual dividends and deserves every praise.

It is my profound belief that the Japanese scholars will be able to share, even if to the smallest extent, some of the enthusiasm and fascination with the eastern philosophical traditions that I personally feel and, I believe, are betrayed by each page of this paper. I am convinced that the days of narrow-mindedness and parochialism in philosophy are past, and that we need to open ourselves to a new understanding of the immense philosophical framework of the world as a whole. Not everyone, of course, can specialize in every period of philosophical thought, but regardless of which area of philosophy commands our primary interest, we can only be enriched by a knowledge of the broader context in which what one might call world philosophy occurs without this appallingly (i.e. a predominantly Eurocentric) viewpoint, but without any fear of being untrue to our own philosophical tradition or to the original impulse to which we are assigned by fate.

Finally, these are reasons why we need so much today a clear recognition of the potential of the perennial philosophy, which is genuinely capable of addressing the situation in which we now find ourselves. Certainly, this perennial perspective transcends the finitude of the stratagems of socialized minds, and we find there much that we must still learn as regards cultural particularity and plurality. Finally, where there lies danger, there too arises the possibility of the salvific, which is in fact a paraphrase of the Qur'anic "So truly with hardship comes ease, truly with hardship comes ease' (XCIV, 5-6).