

# Tradition and the False Prophets of Modernism<sup>1</sup>

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*While nineteenth century materialism closed the mind of man to what is above him,  
twentieth century psychology opened it to what is below him*  
(René Guénon)

*That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of  
things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves  
because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen*  
(Frithjof Schuon)

*The loss of God is death, is desolation, hunger, separation. All the tragedy of man is  
in one word, 'godlessness'*  
(Metropolitan Anthony of Sourzah)

## Introduction

Permit me to begin with a personal reminiscence. Nearly thirty years ago, a decade after completing my undergraduate degree, I decided to return to university to pursue postgraduate studies. I wanted to write a thesis on the work of Frithjof Schuon, which had first struck me, lightning-like, through the anthology *The Sword of Gnosis*. I was interviewed by the Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the university in question and was told, bluntly, that my plan to write a dissertation on the work of Schuon was unacceptable: such a subject did not fall within the Department's frame of what constituted 'serious scholarship'. I was advised to construct a new research proposal. I will not here rehearse the somewhat Kafkaesque story of how, through various stratagems, I finally persuaded the reluctant professor that I should be allowed to proceed with my original plan. Two years later I submitted my dissertation. I was asked to identify two possible examiners; well, I thought, I'd better grasp the nettle, and so nominated the two most distinguished academics in the field. My thesis was duly despatched and I spent an anxious couple of months waiting for their reports. Each examiner evidently took the view that mercy must sometimes prevail over justice; their reports were generous to a fault. The two examiners were Professors Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Huston Smith.

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<sup>1</sup>

A talk given at a conference (Edmonton, October 2007) on Tradition and Modernity. The conference was held under the auspices of the journal *Sacred Web*.

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edited Jacob Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974.

I recount this episode for two reasons. Firstly, it provides me with the opportunity to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Professor Nasr and Professor Smith, and to say what a singular honour it is to share the same platform at this Conference. May I also say what a pleasure it is to have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with some of the other principal exponents of the *sophia perennis* in the contemporary world. Secondly, it reminds us of the melancholy fact that the Wisdom of the Ages is very rarely welcomed in Academia. The contemporary Western intelligentsia, so-called, has been almost completely seduced by the anti-traditional forces of modernity, a theme which I want to elaborate in this brief address. Recall this passage from St Paul:

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. (*Philippians* 4:8)

Many of the speakers at this Conference will no doubt be following this sage advice. But it has fallen to my lot to speak about less congenial matters — and sometimes this is necessary to clear away those ideas and habits of mind which obscure our view of ‘whatsoever things are true’. If some of my remarks seem intemperate my rejoinder is the same as Frithjof Schuon’s: ‘Some people may reproach us with lack of reticence, but we would ask what reticence is shown by philosophers who shamelessly slash at the wisdom of countless centuries?’

## **The Crisis of Modernity**<sup>4</sup>

Let us start with a recognition that there is indeed a fundamental crisis in the modern world and that its root causes are spiritual. The crisis itself can hardly be disputed. Some of the symptoms: ecological catastrophe, a material sign of the rupture between Heaven and Earth; a rampant materialism and consumerism, signifying a surrender to the illusion that man can live by bread alone; the genocidal extirpation of traditional cultures by the careering juggernauts of ‘modernisation’; political barbarities on an almost unimaginable scale; social discord, endemic violence and dislocations of unprecedented proportions; widespread alienation, ennui and a sense of spiritual sterility amidst the frenetic confusion and din of modern life; a religious landscape dominated by internecine and inter-religious strife and by the emergence of aggressive fundamentalisms in both East and West; the loss of any sense of the sacred, even among those who remain committed to religious forms, many of whom have retreated into a simplistic and credulous religious literalism or into a vacuous and ‘horizontal’ liberalism where ‘anything goes’.

The *Vishnu Purana* is a Hindu text dating back nearly two millennia. From that work, here is a description of the degenerations which can be expected in the latter days of the Kali Yuga:

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Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, Perennial Books, no date, reprint of 1961 John Murray edition, 20note.

<sup>4</sup>

Some of the material under this heading, and later in this article under ‘The World of Tradition’, first appeared in Harry Oldmeadow (ed), *The Betrayal of Tradition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004, xi-xvi.

Riches and piety will diminish daily, until the world will be completely corrupted. In those days it will be wealth that confers distinction, passion will be the sole reason for union between the sexes, lies will be the only method of success in business, and women will be the objects merely of sensual gratification. The earth will be valued only for its mineral treasures, dishonesty will be the universal means of subsistence, a simple ablution will be regarded as sufficient purification...The observances of castes, laws, and institutions will no longer be in force in the Dark Age, and the ceremonies prescribed by the Vedas will be neglected. Women will obey only their whims and will be infatuated with pleasure...men of all kinds will presumptuously regard themselves as equals of Brahmins...The Vaishyas will abandon agriculture and commerce and will earn their living by servitude or by the exercise of mechanical professions...The dominant caste will be that of the Shudras...

Is this not a painfully accurate picture of our present condition? Here is another diagnosis of the contemporary condition, written fifty years ago but even more appropriate today. It comes from the English writer Dorothy Sayers:

Futility; lack of a living faith; the drift into loose morality, greedy consumption, financial irresponsibility, and uncontrolled bad temper; a self-opinionated and obstinate individualism; violence, sterility, and lack of reverence for life and property... the exploitation of sex, the debasing of language... the commercialising of religion... mass hysteria and 'spell-binding', venality and string-pulling in public affairs...the fomenting of discord... the exploitation of the lowest and stupidest mass-emotions...

Little wonder, then, that when Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought about 'Western Civilisation', he replied, 'I think it would be a good idea'.

These 'signs of the times'—and the inventory is by no means exhaustive—are plain enough to those with eyes to see. No amount of gilded rhetoric about 'progress', the 'miracles of modern science and technology', or the 'triumphs of democracy' (to mention just three shibboleths of modernity) can hide the fact that our age is tyrannized by an outlook inimical to our most fundamental needs, our deepest yearnings, our most noble aspirations. More problematic is the question of how we arrived at this state of affairs and in which direction we might turn for some remedy.

In his luminous essay, 'No Activity Without Truth', Frithjof Schuon observes,

That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen.

Those truths, so often derided in the modern world, can be found in Tradition—and by this term we mean something very different from the jaundiced senses it has accumulated in the modern mentality ('the blind observance of inherited customs', and the like).

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*The Vishnu Purana*, quoted in William Stoddart, *An Outline of Hinduism*, Washington DC: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1993, 75-76. These passages, in a different translation, can be found in *The Vishnu Purana*, Vol 2, tr. & ed. H.H. Wilson & Nag Sharan Singh, Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1980, 662-3, 866-867.

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Dorothy Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954), quoted in E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1977, 151-152.

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Frithjof Schuon, 'No Activity Without Truth' in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 28 (a different translation of this article can be found in *The Betrayal of Tradition*, 3-14).

For want of a better word we might call the dominant worldview of the post-medieval West ‘modernism’. For present purposes the term comprises the prevalent assumptions, values and attitudes of a world-view fashioned by the most pervasive intellectual and moral influences of recent European history, an outlook in conformity with the *Zeitgeist* of the times. One might classify the constituents of modernism under any number of different schema. Lord Northbourne typifies modernism as ‘anti-traditional, progressive, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking and intensely sentimental’. Seyyed Hossein Nasr gathers these tendencies together under four general features of modern thought: anthropomorphism (and by extension, secularism); evolutionist progressivism; the absence of any sense of the sacred; an unrelieved ignorance of metaphysical principles.

Modernism is a spiritual disease which continues to spread like a plague across the globe, destroying traditional cultures wherever they are still to be found. Although its historical origins are European, modernism is now tied to no specific area or civilisation. Its symptoms can be detected in a wide assortment of inter-related ‘mind sets’ and ‘-isms’, sometimes involved in cooperative co-existence, sometimes engaged in apparent antagonism, but always united by the same underlying assumptions. Scientism, rationalism, relativism, materialism, positivism, empiricism, evolutionism, psychologism, individualism, humanism, existentialism—these are some of the prime follies of modernist thought. The pedigree of this family of ideas can be traced back through a series of intellectual and cultural upheavals in European history and to certain vulnerabilities in Christendom which left it exposed to the subversions of a profane science. The Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the so-called Enlightenment were all incubators of ideas and values which first ravaged Europe and then spread throughout the world like so many bacilli. Behind the bizarre array of ideologies which have proliferated in the last few centuries we can discern a growing and persistent ignorance concerning ultimate realities and an indifference, if not always an overt hostility, to the eternal verities conveyed by Tradition. Not without reason did William Blake characterize the modern worldview as ‘Single Vision’, a horizontal understanding of reality which strips the ‘outer’ world of its mystery, its grandeur and its revelatory function, and denies our human vocation. As he so acutely remarked, ‘Man is either the ark of God or a phantom of the earth and the water.’

The contrast of tradition and modernity is likely to be most illuminating when it is informed by the following considerations:

When the modern world is contrasted with traditional civilisations, it is not simply a question of seeking the good things and the bad things on one side or the other; good and evil are everywhere, so that it is

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The term should not here be confused with its more restricted meaning, referring to certain artistic and literary developments originating in late 19thC Europe.

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Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, London: J.M. Dent, 1963, 13.

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See S.H. Nasr, ‘Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought’, *The Islamic Quarterly* 23:3, 1979, 119-131.

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Blake quoted in Kathleen Raine, ‘The Underlying Order: Nature and the Imagination’ in *Fragments of Infinity: Essays in Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Arvind Sharma, Lindfield (Australia): Unity Press, 1991, 208.

essentially a question of knowing on which side the more important good and on which side the lesser evil is to be found. If someone says that such and such a good exists outside tradition, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the most important good, and it is necessarily represented by tradition; and if someone says that in tradition there exists such and such an evil, the answer is: no doubt, but one must choose the lesser evil, and again it is tradition that embodies it. It is illogical to prefer an evil which involves some benefits to a good which involves some evils.

No one will deny that modernity has its compensations, though these are often of a quite different order from the loudly trumpeted ‘benefits’ of science and technology—some of which are indubitable but many of which issue in consequences far worse than the ills which they are apparently repairing. Furthermore, many so-called ‘advances’ must be seen as the poisoned fruits of a Faustian bargain which one day must come to its bitter conclusion. What indeed is a man profited if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul? On the other hand, one real advantage of living in these latter days is the ready access we have to the spiritual treasures of the world's religious and mythological traditions, including esoteric teachings which have hitherto been veiled in secrecy.

Let us turn our attention to just a few characteristic prejudices of modern thought and to those habits of mind which have robbed us of our birthright as the children of God. I will do so by referring briefly to four representatives of modern thought, each an accomplice in the development of the modern outlook. In the short time available I cannot, clearly, rehearse their theories in any detail. Moreover, I am less concerned with these figures as individual personalities than with those tendencies which they articulate and crystallize, and particularly with the way that they popularized certain key ideas and themes. As René Guénon has remarked, in the intellectual order modernity is rooted in a series of pseudo-mythologies which, in the end, amount to little more than negations, parodies and inversions of traditional understandings. My four representative figures will be altogether familiar to you: Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. It is no accident that they all belong to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period in which the seeds of revolt against Tradition, sown in the late medieval period, produced their fullest, most seductive and most noxious blooms, at least on the mental plane; the full consequences of that rebellion lay in wait in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surely the most blood-stained on record.

### **Charles Darwin (1809-1882)**

Darwin's hypothesis, foreshadowed in the work of many other contemporary scientists and social theorists alike and germinated in the sinister population theories of Malthus, is one of the most elegant, seductive and pernicious of all ‘pseudo-mythologies’. In a beguiling admixture of fact, imaginative speculation, circular argumentation and painstaking system-building Darwin seemed to produce an objective and scientific account of the development of species, to provide an account of how life-forms came to be as they are. At the heart of the Darwinian schema lies a preposterous inversion of traditional understandings. In the opening passage of St John's Gospel, one of the most exalted and mystical of texts, we are told that ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh...’ (*John* 1:1,14). Darwin proposes precisely the opposite, that ‘In the

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Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1966, 42.

beginning was the Flesh (that is, matter), which became Word (consciousness, or Spirit)...'. Out of inert matter, through some quite unexplained process, emerged microscopic life forms and over a very very long period of time, through endless transformations and mutations and in accord with principles which Darwin claimed to have discovered, these became *homo sapiens*. In brief, the microscopic organisms from the prehistoric algal slime — organisms whose origins Darwin is utterly unable to explain — turn into Man. Or to put it even more tersely, the primeval amoeba turns into a St Francis, an Ibn 'Arabi, a Lao Tze! Darwin's whole thesis hinges on the proposition that one species can transform itself into another. Whatever partial insights Darwin's work might yield this central theme is an absurdity which flies in the face of all traditional wisdom. To call man a 'trousered ape' betrays a profound misunderstanding of the human condition, and as E.F.<sup>13</sup> Schumacher observed, one might as well call a dog 'a barking plant or a running cabbage'.

Darwinism was a 'grand narrative' perfectly suited to all the prejudices of the age — an account of the beginnings and the development of life which erased the Creator, now replaced by a clutch of more or less inexorable 'laws' which were amenable to objective explanation, an account, moreover, which looked to an inevitable advance. Darwin's transformationist hypothesis not only came to dominate scientific thinking but was soon appropriated, in the form of Social Darwinism, to buttress all manner of malignant ideas about race, empire, 'Progress' and the development of civilisations. The pseudo-mythology of evolutionism lent itself to social ideologies in which the brutal imperatives<sup>14</sup> of competition, self-interest, 'survival' and racial 'hygiene' were all valorized as 'natural'. Consider, if you can, the implications of a passage such as the following, from Darwin's own *The Descent of Man*:

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes...will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.

Darwinism has become a kind of pseudo-religion, a fact which explains the zealotry with which many scientists remain wilfully blind to the mounting scientific evidence against the Darwinian scheme, especially in its absurd claim that one species can transform into another. There are many angles from which Darwinism might be exposed as fraudulent—scientific, logical, religious and metaphysical. We cannot here rehearse any kind of critique but it is perhaps worth noting that in many respects it is a pity that the fight against Darwinism has been carried out by fundamentalist creationists who are quite unable to meet Darwin on his own ground. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that however naïve and sometimes obscufatory such critics often are, their fundamental intuition is valid.

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E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 31.

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On the social effects of Darwinist ideas see Marilynne Robinson's essay, 'Darwinism', in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, New York: Picador, 2005, 28-75.

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quoted in M. Robinson, 'Darwinism', 35

Darwin and his epigones offer us a spectacular instance of the truth of René Guénon's observation that

when profane science leaves the domain of the mere observation of facts, and tries to get something out of an indefinite accumulation of separate details which is its sole immediate result, it retains as one of its chief characteristics the more or less laborious construction of purely hypothetical theories. These theories can necessarily never be more than hypothetical, for facts in themselves are always susceptible of diverse explanations and so never have been and never will be able to guarantee the truth of any theory...and besides, such theories are not really inspired by the results of experience to nearly the same extent<sup>16</sup> as by certain preconceived ideas and by some of the predominant tendencies of modern thought.

The principle which needs always to be foregrounded in any discussion of modern science is to be found in the Vedantic insistence that 'The world of *maya* [i.e., the time-space world which science investigates] is not inexplicable; it is only not self-explanatory.' Sankara says that any attempt to understand the material world without knowledge of the Real is akin to an attempt to explain night and day without reference to the sun. In any case, a profane science can only ever tell us about auxiliary and mechanical causes; it can never get to the root of things, just as it must remain mute whenever we confront questions about *meaning* and *value*. As to modern science's endless accumulation of empirical data we need only recall Gai Eaton's remark that this is a matter of knowing more and more about less and less, and that 'our ignorance of the few things that really matter is as prodigious as our knowledge of trivialities'.

### **Karl Marx (1818-1883)**

A year or two back a British newspaper conducted a poll in which readers were asked to nominate the most influential thinker of the last thousand years. The runaway winner was Karl Marx, the German philosopher, social theorist, Father of Communism (both as body of theory and as a revolutionary political movement), the grave-digger of capitalism and religion alike. He might also be described as the author of what Carlyle so properly called the 'Dismal Science' of economics. Marx needs no further introduction here; nor is there any point in providing an overview of his theory of dialectical materialism and its endlessly elaborated analyses of the forces of production and distribution in his *magnum opus*, *Das Kapital*, surely one of the most ponderous and impenetrable of works but a landmark in the emergence of that family of disciplines which herd together under the canopy of 'the social sciences'. No, here I can do no more than allude to a few ideas which have become the stock-in-trade of the modern outlook. Let us begin with some well-known words from Friedrich Engel's funeral oration:

<sup>16</sup>

René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995, 149.

<sup>17</sup>

See Harry Oldmeadow, 'Sankara's Doctrine of *Maya*', *Asian Philosophy* 2:2, 1992, 131-146.

<sup>18</sup>

cited as an epigraph in *Tomorrow* 12:3, 1964, 191.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

It was altogether appropriate that Engels should link the thought of Marx and Darwin. Indeed, Marx himself remarked, 'Darwin's book [*On the Origin of Species*, 1859] is very important and serves me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history'. Both could be said to be children of the so-called Enlightenment: both imagined themselves to be engaged in a more or less scientific enterprise; each popularized a form of evolutionist thought, in the biological and social domains respectively; both detonated a depth-charge under the foundations of religious belief.

Return for a moment to the passage from Engels. Notice the reduction of man to an economic and social animal, a being whose nature is entirely conditioned, indeed determined by material circumstances over which he has little control. Man's spiritual dimension is thereby stripped away as no more than the residue of a now-obsolete religious conception which hitherto has alienated man from his true nature as a social being, fashioned by the material forces of history. We are all familiar with Marx's characterisation of religion as 'the opium of the people', a drug which deflects their attention from their real circumstances with its illusory promises of an afterlife and which anaesthetizes their political will. Here is a famous passage from Marx's somewhat fragmentary but lethal writings on religion:

Man, who looked for a superman in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the *reflexion* of himself, will no longer be disposed to find but the *semblance* of himself, the non-human (Unmensch) where he seeks and must seek his true reality...*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again... The struggle against religion is therefore...the struggle against *the other world*, of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*. ...Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness...The criticism of religion disillusiones man and makes him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.

Following Feuerbach and Marx, Engels asserted that 'All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a

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Frederick Engels, 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx', in Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968, 435.

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Letter to Lasalle, 16 January 1861, quoted in Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx*, London: Fourth Estate, 1999, 364.

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*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* in Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1957, 37-38



reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.<sup>22</sup> This threadbare idea has become the very calling card of the modern intellectual.

Hand-in-hand with this repudiation of religion and all that it entails, is a secular humanism. In his doctoral thesis Marx had written,

Philosophy makes no secret of it. Prometheus' confession 'in a word, I detest all Gods', is its own confession, its own slogan against <sup>23</sup>all Gods in heaven and earth who do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity.

Linked with this humanism, which finds antecedents in the thought of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, there is Marx's Utopianism, a strain of thought which anticipates a world in which all the social iniquities and inequalities, all the class oppressions of the past, are devoured in revolutionary violence, ushering in an era in which a man might 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening' and philosophize at night. At this point in history I hardly need observe that Marx's romantic and apocalyptic Utopianism fuelled abuses so many and so monstrous that we can hardly grasp their magnitude — a case of making a hell on earth, as the Russian novelist Dostoevsky so chillingly predicted in his own dark masterpiece, *Notes from Underground* (1864). The hallmarks of Marx's thought, in brief: a corrosive and atheistic materialism, a Promethean humanism, and a sentimental and potentially murderous Utopianism, and all this dressed up in quasi-scientific garb.

### **Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)**

Sigmund Freud, the undisputed progenitor of modern psychology and psychiatry, remarked in a letter, 'The moment a man questions <sup>25</sup>the meaning and value of life he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence.' From a traditional point of view, one need hardly do more than adduce this extraordinary claim to throw Freud's theorizing out of court altogether. As we know, Freud himself harboured an animus towards religion which, in his own terms, could only be described as pathological. No one needs reminding that the relations between modern psychology and traditional religions have not always been friendly. Freud struck the key note in his insistence that, to state the matter as briefly as possible, religious beliefs were a thinly camouflaged prolongation of childhood traumas and pathologies. He identified 'three powers which may dispute the basic position of science': art, philosophy and religion, of which, he said, 'religion alone is to be taken seriously as an enemy'. Philosophy, he suggested, is basically harmless because, despite its ambitious pretensions, it 'has no direct influence on the great mass of mankind: it is of interest to only a small number even of top-layer intellectuals and is scarcely intelligible to anyone else.' Art 'is almost always harmless

<sup>22</sup> *Anti-Dühring*, in Marx & Engels, *On Religion*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Preface to Marx's doctoral thesis, quoted in David McLellan, *Marx*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1975, 26.

<sup>24</sup> from *The German Ideology*, quoted in Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Maria Bonaparte, from *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, quoted in Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 29.

and beneficent; it does not seek to be anything but an illusion'.<sup>26</sup> This leaves religion as 'an immense power' and an imposing obstacle to the scientific enlightenment of mankind, the project in which Freud understood himself to be engaged.

The last contribution to the criticism of the religious *Weltanschauung* [he wrote], was effected by psychoanalysis, by showing how religion originated from the helplessness<sup>27</sup> of children and by tracing its contents to the survival into maturity of the wishes and needs of childhood.

Freud identified three fatal blows against what he called man's 'narcissism', by which he meant the belief that man was made in the image of God: Copernican cosmology, Darwinian biology, and psychoanalytical psychology.<sup>28</sup> We do not here have time to excavate the foundations of what Schuon has called the 'psychological imposture' and its usurpation of religious functions which lie well beyond its competence, but the drift of much of Freud's thought can be signalled by a small sample of quotations, the sinister implications of which will be readily apparent to you. From *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*:

[The *Weltanschauung* of science] asserts that there are no sources of knowledge of the universe other than the intellectual working-over of carefully scrutinized observations... and alongside of it no knowledge derived from revelation, intuition or divination.

Many of his observations on religion are now all too well-known. Here are a few:

[Religion is] a counterpart to the neurosis which individual civilized men have to go through in their passage from childhood to maturity.

I should like to insist... that the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex.

[Religious ideas] are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.<sup>32</sup>

And this, on the nature of the id, which Freud referred to as 'the core of our being':

It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality... we call it a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitations...It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle....The id of course knows no judgements of value...the quantitative

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London: Hogarth Press, 1974, 160-161.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 167.

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, Vol 1, cited in Whitall Perry, 'The Revolt Against Moses: A New Look at Psychoanalysis', in *Challenges to a Secular Society*, Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996, 17-38.

<sup>29</sup> *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 168.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950, 156.

<sup>32</sup> *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XX1, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1964, 30.

factor, which is intimately linked to the pleasure principle, dominates all its processes. Instinctual cathexes seeking discharge—that, in our view, is all there is in the id.

Freud's theories about the 'psychogenesis' of religion and his grotesque speculations about the early history of mankind, bear an unmistakably evolutionist cast. Here is a representative passage:

While the different religions wrangle with one another as to which of them is in possession of the truth, our view is that the truth of religion may be left altogether on one side. Religion is an attempt to master the sensory world, in which we are situated by means of the wishful world, which we have developed within us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve this. Its doctrines bear the imprint of the times in which they arose, the ignorant times of the childhood of humanity.

As Guénon and others have noted, Freud's agenda might well be summed up in one of his own favourite lines from Virgil, and one which he inscribed on the title page of his first major work: 'If I cannot bend the gods, I will stir up hell.'<sup>33</sup> Guénon drew attention to some of the infernal influences unleashed by Freudian psychoanalysis, putting the matter most succinctly when he observed that 'While nineteenth century materialism closed the mind of man to what is above him, twentieth century psychology opened it to what is below him' —a theme taken up by Frithjof Schuon:

What we term 'psychological imposture' is the tendency to reduce everything to psychological factors and to call into question not only what is intellectual or spiritual—the first being related to truth and the second to life in and by truth—but also the human spirit as such, and thereby its capacity of adequation and, still more evidently, its inward illimitation and transcendence. The same belittling and truly subversive tendency rages in all the domains that 'scientism' claims to embrace, but its most acute expression is beyond all doubt to be found in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is at once an end-point and a cause, as is always the case with profane ideologies,<sup>37</sup> like materialism and evolutionism, of which it is really a logical and fatal ramification and a natural ally.

To put the matter slightly differently we might say that materialism, evolutionism and psychologism are not in fact three distinct theories but rather variants of that singular and eccentric world view which Guénon exposed in *The Reign of Quantity* (1945). Before leaving the subject of psychoanalysis we might also ponder the implications of the following passage from Titus Burckhardt, dealing with scientism in general and psychologism in particular:

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<sup>33</sup> *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 74-75.

<sup>34</sup> *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 168.

<sup>35</sup> from Virgil, inscribed in *Die Traumdeutung*, noted in René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, note 139, 355. For some commentary on Freud's ideas about religion see Wolfgang Smith, *Cosmos and Transcendence*, 109, and Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, London: Rider, 2004, 66-77.

<sup>36</sup> from *L'Erreur Spirite* (1923), quoted in A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996, 61. Guénon's most devastating critique of psychologism is to be found in *The Reign of Quantity* (1945).

<sup>37</sup> Frithjof Schuon, 'The Psychological Imposture', in *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1986, 195.

...modern science displays a certain number of fissures that are not only due to the fact that the world of phenomena is indefinite and that therefore no science could come to the end of it; those fissures derive especially from a systematic ignorance of all the noncorporeal dimensions of reality. They manifest themselves right down to the foundations of modern science, and in domains as seemingly 'exact' as that of physics; they become gaping cracks when one turns to the disciplines connected with the study of the forms of life, not to mention psychology, where an empiricism that is relatively valid in the physical order encroaches strangely upon a foreign field. These fissures, which do not affect only the theoretical realm, are far from harmless; they represent, on the contrary, in their technical consequences, so many seeds of catastrophe.<sup>38</sup>

## Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

While Darwin, Marx and Freud have long been recognized as three massively influential thinkers in whose work several characteristically modern ideas are given their most dramatic and potent expressions, it is now perhaps time to add the name of Friedrich Nietzsche to the roster of the false prophets of modernity. Nietzsche is a particularly problematic case, partly because his work is full of flashing insights of an almost entirely destructive kind. Here I can do no more than take brief note of his peculiar role in the development of modern thought.

Nietzsche is best-known for his pronouncement of the 'death of God' by which he meant that the foundations of a religious worldview had now collapsed and that no self-respecting intellectual could any longer subscribe to a belief in God. Here he is thundering against all traditional and religious conceptions:

The 'Law', the 'will of God', the 'sacred book', 'inspiration'—all merely words for the conditions under which the priest comes to power, by which he maintains his power—these concepts are to be found at the basis of all priestly organizations, all priestly or priestly-philosophical power-structures. The 'holy lie'—common to Confucius, the Law-Book of Manu, Mohammad, the Christian Church—: it is not lacking in Plato. 'The truth exists': this means, wherever it is heard, the priest is lying...<sup>39</sup>

Nietzsche also lodged a time-bomb under the whole idea of objective Truth; his philosophical legacy has yielded its most acidic fruits, a century after his death, in the wholesale relativism of postmodernist theorizing as found in the work of such figures as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, to mention only two of the self-styled Parisian oracles, those 'monks of negation' whose work has exercised such a corrosive effect on the Academy over the last three decades. Many of you will be familiar with other leitmotiv in Nietzsche's work — his lacerating attacks on Christianity, and particularly its spiritual egalitarianism; the extolling of the *Übermensch*, the 'Over-man', freed from the restraints of stifling bourgeois morality, exercising the 'will to power' in an heroic 'self-overcoming'; his consignment of traditional philosophy, metaphysics and ethics to the dust-bin of human history. As Schuon has remarked of Nietzsche, a certain nobility of soul is evident in the work of this troubled genius, particularly in its poetic expressions, marked by 'the passionate exteriorisation of an inward

<sup>38</sup>

Titus Burckhardt, 'Cosmology and Modern Science', in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 131.

<sup>39</sup>

from *The Anti-Christ* (1988), in Philip Novak (ed), *The Vision of Nietzsche*, Rockport: Element, 1996, 52.

fire, but in a manner that is both deviated and demented'<sup>40</sup> — the deviation evident in Nietzsche's peculiar amalgam of Machiavelli, German romanticism and a pitiless Darwinism. What was lacking in this 'volcanic genius' was any real intellectual discernment which might have channelled his profound reaction against the mediocrity of the age in more profitable directions.

Nietzsche is indeed a particularly strange case: whilst celebrating the 'death of God' he simultaneously understood some of its appalling consequences. Consider, for instance, this famous passage from *The Gay Science*:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place and cried incessantly: 'I am looking for God! I am looking for God!' — As many of those did not believe in God were standing there he excited considerable laughter... The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. 'Where has God gone?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. We have killed him — you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up and down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is more and more night not coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God?

As one representative of the Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourzah, put it: 'The loss of God is death, is desolation, hunger, separation. All the tragedy of man is in one word, 'godlessness'.'<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche understood this all too well — but he couldn't help himself, seduced by his own delirious dream of the Dionysian *Übermensch*.

### Some Common Characteristics

Let me now quickly draw attention to some features shared by these four thinkers. These might serve as signposts to some of the most pervasive aspects of modern intellectual life:

- *A spurious 'originality'*: Each of these thinkers imagines that he has discovered a hitherto unknown secret, a key with which to unlock the mysteries of the human condition. For Darwin it is the evolutionist schema fuelled by adaptations to the environment, mutations and the 'survival of the fittest'; for Marx, the dialectic of the material forces of history; for Freud the sexual drive with all its accompanying repressions, projections, complexes and neuroses; for Nietzsche, the 'will to power'. There is an apparent novelty in the writings of each of these figures — hence their elevation to the pantheon of modern thought which treasures nothing so much as a mis-named 'originality'. In reality, such apparently new insights as are to be found in the works of these thinkers often turn out to be a distortion of ideas which have been in circulation for centuries, even millennia. By way of an example one might adduce

<sup>40</sup>

Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990, 15.

<sup>41</sup>

from *The Gay Science* (1882) in *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 202-203.

<sup>42</sup>

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourzah, *God and Man*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974, 68.

Freud's unacknowledged debts to Kabbalah. The theorisations of these false prophets often amount to little more than the negation, parodying or inversion of traditional doctrines half-understood, wrenched out of their spiritual framework and 'flattened out'.

- *Evolutionism, progressivism*: Secondly, all four of these 'prophets of modernity' succumbed to evolutionist and progressivist ideologies which engendered a contempt for the past and for our ancestors, and indeed, for the very notion of tradition. Of course, the barbarities of the twentieth century, starting on the fields of Flanders, disenchanted some of the more intelligent apostles of Progress but it is truly remarkable to witness the tenacious grip this sentimental idea still has amongst the Western intelligentsia. Evolutionism and progressivism has also intruded into the domain of religion itself, evident in the thought of people such as Teilhard de Chardin, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo, to name only three. Not surprisingly, the consequences have been disastrous.

- *the idolatry of Reason*: The modern mentality is rationalistic, materialistic, empiricist, historicist and humanistic — in the narrow sense of the word — and these characteristics too are all too evident in the work of our representative figures, three of whom were regular worshippers at the Temple of Reason (Nietzsche is the exception here). The adulation of Reason and of an empirical and materialistic science could only arise in a world in which the *sacra scientia* of the traditional worlds had been lost. To cleave to these much-vaunted modes of modern thought is simply to announce that one is entirely bereft of any metaphysical discernment, entrapped in the world of *maya*, that tissue of fugitive relativities which makes up the time-space world. As Frithjof Schuon has tersely remarked, 'The rationalism of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains; this is logic of a kind, perhaps, but it has nothing to do with reality.'

- *the rejection of Tradition*: To succumb to the idolatry of Reason is also, necessarily, to turn one's back on the ever-present sources of traditional intellectuality and spirituality, which is to say doctrine and spiritual method — the epochal Revelations providentially directed towards various human collectivities, the traditions issuing from these Revelations, the Scriptures and commentaries of the doctors and sages of each tradition, the witness of the saints and mystics. All this is thrown out in favour of the prejudices of the day, largely fashioned by those pseudo-mythologies current at any particular moment. In the case of our four representatives of modernism we might well refer to the pseudo-mythologies of evolutionism, materialism, psychologism and relativism.

- *the denial of God*: Each of these thinkers leaves God out of the frame. In the case of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the disavowal is quite explicit whilst in Darwin it is a matter of ignoring the question, which amounts to more or less the same thing. These are godless thinkers who testify to the truth of Dostoevsky's frightful premonition that 'without God, everything is permitted' — again, an insight shared by Nietzsche. The transcendent dimension of both the cosmos and the microcosmic human being is stripped away to leave us in an entirely

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See Whitall Perry, 'The Revolt Against Moses', 17-38.

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Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 42.

horizontal world in which there is no longer any sense of our dignity, responsibility and freedom as the children of God. In such a world there is no longer any sense of the sacred from which we might take our spiritual bearings. Our souls cry out for bread but we are given stones.

• *the denial of Man*: Finally, let us ask ourselves to what manner of self-understanding these pseudo-mythologies force-march us? In each case we are offered a meagre and charmless portrait of the human condition: man as biological organism, as a highly evolved ape whose essential function is to ensure the survival of the species, and whose behaviour is governed by the iron dictates of biological necessity; man as economic animal, fashioned by his material environment and by the impersonal forces of history; the human being as a puppet of the dark forces of the Id; man as a herd-creature, mediocre, cowardly, foolish and deluded, redeemed only by the *Übermensch* who dares to exercise the will to power. In the face of each of these degraded, reductionistic and bleak accounts of the human being, one can only ask, what could be expected of such a creature? — to which the inescapable answer is, not much! Is it not one of the most galling ironies of modernity that these much vaunted ideologies which, we are told *ad nauseam*, have emancipated us from ‘the shackles of ignorance and superstition’, have, in reality robbed us of all that is most precious in the human estate ‘hard to obtain’, by denying the Divine Spark which we all carry within? This, truly speaking, is a monstrous crime against God and thereby against humanity.

In the light of our general theme at this conference let me now turn to a few very brief remarks about Tradition against which we are bound to judge the modern world.

## The World of Tradition

St Augustine speaks of ‘wisdom uncreate, the same now that it ever was, the same to be forevermore’. This timeless wisdom has carried many names: *philosophia perennis*, *Lex Aeterna*, *Hagia Sophia*, *Din al-Haqq*, *Akalika Dhamma* and *Sanatana Dharma* are among the better known. In itself this truth is formless and beyond all conceptualizations. Any attempt to define it is, to borrow a metaphor, like trying to catch the river in a net. This universal wisdom, in existence since the genesis of time and the spiritual patrimony of all humankind, can also be designated as the Primordial Tradition. René Guénon refers to ‘...the Tradition contained in the Sacred Books of all peoples, a Tradition which in reality is everywhere the same, in spite of all the diverse forms it assumes to adapt itself to each race and period...’. In this sense tradition is synonymous with a perennial philosophy or wisdom which is eternal, universal and immutable. The Primordial Tradition or *sophia perennis* is of supra-human origin and is in no sense a product or evolute of human thought. It is the birth-right of humanity. All the great religious teachings, albeit in the differing vocabularies appropriate to the spiritual economy in question, affirm just such a principle. Recall Krishna's

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St Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.10.

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René Guénon in *La Gnose*, 1909, quoted in Whittall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, 20.

declaration, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the pre-existence of his message, proclaimed at the dawn of time. *Bhagavad Gita* IV:5.i). Likewise Christ, speaking in his cosmic function as incarnation of the Truth, states, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am’. (*St John* VIII.58) ‘Tradition’, then, in its most pristine sense is this primordial truth and as such takes on the status of a first cause, a cosmic datum, a principial reality woven into the very fabric of the universe and ingrained in the human spirit.

‘Tradition’ also has a secondary meaning, directly pertinent to our theme. Etymologically it simply means ‘that which is transmitted’. Here the term cannot be equated with a formless and immutable Truth but is, rather, that Truth as it finds formal expression, through the medium of a divine Revelation, in the myths, doctrines, rituals, symbols, and other manifestations of any religious culture. As Lord Northbourne has observed, ‘Tradition, in the rightful sense of the word, is the chain that joins civilisation to Revelation.’<sup>47</sup> In this context ‘tradition’ becomes more or less synonymous with ‘religion’, always with the proviso that it is integral, orthodox religions of which we speak. Let us also not forget that

When people talk about ‘civilisation’ they generally attribute a qualitative meaning to the term, but really civilisation only represents a value provided it is supra-human in origin and implies for the civilised man a sense of the sacred... A sense of the sacred is fundamental for every civilisation because fundamental for man; the sacred—that which is immutable, inviolable, and so infinitely majestic—is in the very substance of our spirit and of our existence.<sup>48</sup>

Traditional societies are grounded in an awareness of this reality. Society itself represents nothing of permanent or absolute value but only insofar as it provides a context for the sense of the sacred and the spiritual life which it implies. At radical odds with Tradition, in all of its senses, stands the world of modernity and the Promethean hubris which underpins it.

What, essentially is the message of Tradition and the traditions for the modern world? Well, this is a very large question which might be answered in any number of ways. A Hindu swami summed up the essential message of his own tradition through four propositions:

1. God is;
2. God can be realized;
3. To realize God is the supreme goal of human existence;
4. God can be realized in many ways.

Might it not be said, my friends, that this, in capsule form, is the message of all religious traditions?

### **Staying Afloat in the Kali Yuga**

At a time when the forces of anti-Tradition sometimes seem overwhelming and when we feel unable to keep our hands to the plough, let us recall Frithjof Schuon’s reminder that no effort

<sup>47</sup>

Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, 34.

<sup>48</sup>

Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, 33.

<sup>49</sup>

Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981, 354-355.



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on behalf of the Truth is ever in vain. We must dispel the false charges sometimes levelled at traditionalists that they are dusty obscurantists ‘out of touch’ with the contemporary world, that they want to ‘wind back the clock’, that they are romantic reactionaries escaping into an idealized past. Let us never forget that the essential message of tradition is timeless and thus ever new, ever fresh, and always germane to both our immediate condition and to our ultimate destiny. As Schuon remarks, a ‘nostalgia for the past’ is, in itself, nothing; all that is meaningful is ‘a nostalgia<sub>1</sub> for the sacred’ which ‘cannot be situated elsewhere than in the liberating ‘now’ of God’. No doubt our crepuscular era is riddled with all manner of confusion but there are always saints and sages in our midst to whom we can turn for guidance. In recent times one might mention such figures as the Algerian Sufi master, Shaykh Ahmed Al Alawi, or Hindu sages such as Paramahansa Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Ananda-mayi, or Native American visionaries such as Black Elk and Yellowtail, or the Christian monk, Henri Le Saux who became Swami Abhishiktananda, not to mention the many wise lamas and masters of the Far Eastern world, including such figures as His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. Then, too, there is the abiding work and example of the great perennialists of the modern era: René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon, and Martin Lings, to mention only a few who have already gone to the further shore. Here are some words from Guénon we would do well to ponder:

Those who might be tempted to give way to despair should realize that nothing accomplished in this order can ever be lost, that confusion, error and darkness can win the day only apparently and in a purely ephemeral way, that all partial and transitory disequilibrium must perforce<sup>2</sup> contribute towards the great equilibrium of the whole, and that nothing can ultimately prevail against the power of truth. Their<sub>3</sub> device should be that used formerly by certain initiatory organizations of the West : Vincit Omnia Veritas.

In conclusion let me say what a privilege and a blessing it is to have the opportunity to participate in this gathering and to share with you that spiritual radiance that is inevitably — one may say providentially—generated whenever men and women of different faiths come together, in a spirit of good will, to open themselves to the workings of the Spirit. Let me conclude with some beautiful lines from Rumi to which I have returned many times on my own faltering journey:

Come, come whoever you are,  
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, It doesn't matter.  
Ours is not a caravan of despair.  
Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times.  
Come, come yet again, come.

Thank you, and Peace be with you!

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Frithjof Schuon, “No Activity Without Truth”, 39.

51

Frithjof Schuon, ‘On the Margin of Liturgical Improvisations’ in *The Sword of Gnosis*, 353.

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These are the concluding words of René Guénon’s *Crisis of the Modern World* (1927). This translation is taken from the *Vincit Omnia Veritas* website: <http://www.religioperennis.org/ruh.religioperennis.org/index.html>

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