

Right Hand of Truth: Life and Work of Titus Burckhardt

by

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Titus Burckhardt, a German Swiss, was born in Florence in 1908 and died in Lausanne in 1984. He devoted all his life to the study and the exposition of the different aspects of Wisdom and Tradition.

In the age of modern science and technocracy, Titus Burckhardt was one of the most remarkable of the exponents of universal truth, in the realm of metaphysics as well as in the realm of cosmology and of traditional art. In a world of existentialism, psychoanalysis, and sociology, he was a major voice of the *philosophia perennis*, that “wisdom uncreate” that is expressed in Platonism, Vedanta, Sufism, Taoism, and other authentic esoteric or sapiential teachings. In literary and philosophical terms, he was an eminent member of the “traditionalist school” of twentieth-century authors.

The great forerunner-cum-originator of the “traditionalist” school was René Guénon (1886-1951). Guénon traced the origin of what he called the modern deviation to the ending of the Middle Ages and the arrival of the Renaissance, that cataclysmic inrush of secularization, when nominalism vanquished realism, individualism (or humanism) replaced universalism, and empiricism banished scholasticism. An important part of Guénon’s work was therefore his critique of the modern world from an implacably “Platonic” or metaphysical point of view. This was fully laid forth in his two masterly volumes *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity*. The positive side of Guénon’s work was his exposition of the immutable principles of universal metaphysics and traditional orthodoxy. His main source was the Shankarian doctrine of “non-duality” (*advaita*), and his chief work in this respect is *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*. However, he also turned readily to other traditional sources, since he considered all traditional forms to be various expressions of the one supra-formal Truth. A final aspect of Guénon’s work was his brilliant exposition of the intellectual content of traditional symbols, from whichever religion they might come. See in this connection his *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée*.

An illustrious scholar deeply influenced by Guénon was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) who, while being distinguished and gifted in his own right, had the merit, relatively late in

life, of making the acquaintance of, and being thoroughly convinced by, the “traditional point of view” as it had been expounded, so fully and so precisely, in Guénon’s books.

It is important to note that Guénon’s writings, decisively important though they were, were purely “theoretical” in character, and made no pretence of dealing with the question of “realization”. In other words, they were generally concerned with “intellectuality” (or doctrine) and not directly with “spirituality” (or method).

The sun rose for the “traditionalist” school with the appearance of the work of Frithjof Schuon (born in Basle in 1907). Thirty years ago, an English Thomist wrote of him: “His work has the intrinsic authority of a contemplative intelligence”.¹ More recently, a senior American academic declared: “In depth and breadth, [he is] a paragon of our time. I know of no living thinker who begins to rival him.”² T. S. Eliot’s perception was similar. Regarding Schuon’s first book, he wrote in 1953: “I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion.”

Schuon’s work began to appear during the latter part of Guénon’s life. Until his dying day, Guénon used to refer to him (for example, in the pages of *Etudes Traditionnelles*) as “notre éminent collaborateur”. Schuon continued, in even more breath-taking fashion, the perspicacious and irrefutable critique of the modern world, and reached unsurpassable heights in his exposition of the essential truth, illuminating and saving, that lies at the heart of every revealed form. Schuon called this supra-formal truth the *religio perennis*. This term, which does not imply a rejection of the similar terms *philosophia perennis* and *sophia perennis*, nevertheless contains a hint of an additional dimension which is unfailingly present in Schuon’s writings. This is that intellectual understanding entails a spiritual responsibility, that intelligence requires to be complemented by sincerity and faith, and that “seeing” (in height) implies “believing” (in depth). In other words, the greater our perception of essential and saving truth, the greater our obligation towards an effort of inward or spiritual “realization”.

Schuon’s work began with a comprehensive general study, the very title of which serves to set the scene: *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. His further works include: *Language of the Self* (on Hinduism), *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, *Understanding Islam*, *Castes and Races*, *Logic and Transcendence*, and, more recently, a wide-ranging “compendium” of philosophic and spiritual enlightenment entitled *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*.

We can now return to Titus Burckhardt. Although he first saw the light of day in Florence, Burckhardt was the scion of a patrician family of Basle. He was the great-nephew of the famous art-historian Jacob Burckhardt and the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt. Titus Burckhardt was Frithjof Schuon’s junior by one year, and they spent their early schooldays together in Basle

¹ Bernard Kelly, in *Dominican Studies* (London), Vol. 7, 1954.

² Emeritus Professor Huston Smith, 1974.

around the time of the First World War. This was the beginning of an intimate friendship and a deeply harmonious intellectual and spiritual association that was to last a lifetime.

Burckhardt's chief metaphysical exposition, beautifully complementing the work of Schuon, is *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*. This is an intellectual masterpiece, which analyses with precision, by a series of lucid and economical definitions, what esoterism is and what it is not, goes on to examine the doctrinal foundations of Islamic esoterism or Sufism, and ends with an inspired description of "spiritual alchemy" or the contemplative path that leads to spiritual realization. This work clearly established Burckhardt as the leading exponent, after Schuon, of intellectual doctrine and spiritual method.

Burckhardt devoted a large portion of his writings to traditional cosmology, which he saw in a sense as the "handmaid of metaphysics". He formally presented the principles at stake in his masterly and concise article "Nature de la Perspective Cosmologique" (published in *Etudes Traditionnelles* in 1948). Much later he covered the cosmological ground very fully—with detailed references to the main branches of modern science—in his brilliant treatise "Cosmology and Modern Science" (published in *Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman, in 1974).

Not unconnected with his interest in cosmology, Burckhardt had a particular affinity with traditional art and craftsmanship and was skilled in the evaluation of traditional architecture, iconography, and other arts and crafts. In particular, he dwelt on how they had been—and could be—turned to account spiritually, both as meaningful activities which by virtue of their inherent symbolism harbour a doctrinal message, and above all as supports for spiritual realization and as a means of grace. *Ars sine scientia nihil*. Here of course it is a case of *scientia sacra* and *ars sacra*, these being the two sides of the same coin. This is the realm of the craft initiations of the various traditional civilizations, and specifically of such things, in the Middle Ages, as operative masonry and alchemy. Indeed Burckhardt's principal work in the field of cosmology was his full-length book *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, a brilliant presentation of alchemy as the expression of a spiritual psychology and as an intellectual and symbolic support for contemplation and realization.

Burckhardt's main work in the field of art was of course his *Sacred Art in East and West*, which contains many wonderful chapters on the metaphysics and aesthetics of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam, and ends with a useful and practical insight into the contemporary situation entitled "The Decadence and the Renewal of Christian Art". A comprehensive summary of the essential elements of this book is to be published for the first time in *The Unanimous Tradition*, a compendium of articles by traditionalist authors edited by Ranjit Fernando (Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, in preparation).

During the fifties and sixties, Burckhardt was the artistic director of the Urs Graf Publishing House in Olten near Basle. His main activity during these years was the production and publication of a whole series of facsimiles of exquisite illuminated medieval manuscripts, especially early Celtic manuscripts of the Gospels, such as the Book of Kells and the Book of

Durrow (from Trinity College, Dublin) and the Book of Lindisfarne (from the British Library, London). This was pioneer work of the highest quality and a publishing achievement which immediately received wide acclaim both from experts and the wider public.

His production of the magnificent facsimile of the Book of Kells brought him a remarkable encounter with Pope Pius XII. The Urs Graf Publishing House wished to present a copy of the edition to the saintly and princely Pope, and it was decided that the best person to effect the presentation was the artistic director Burckhardt. In the eyes of the Pope, Burckhardt was ostensibly a Protestant gentleman from Basle. The Pope granted him a private audience at his summer residence in Castelgandolfo. When, in the audience chamber, the white-clad figure of the Pope suddenly appeared, he welcomingly approached his visitor and said to him in German: “Sie sind also Herr Burckhardt?” Burckhardt bowed and, when the Pope offered him his hand bearing the Fisherman’s Ring, he respectfully took it in his. As a non-Catholic, however, he kissed, not the ring (as is the custom amongst Catholics), but the Pope’s fingers. “Which the Pope smilingly permitted,” Burckhardt adds.

Together they talked about the Dark Ages and about the surpassingly beautiful manuscripts of the Gospels that had been so lovingly and finely produced during them. At the end of the audience the Pope gave his blessing: “From my heart I bless you, your family, your colleagues, and your friends.”

It was during these years with the Urs Graf Publishing House that Burckhardt presided over an interesting series of publications with the general title of *Stätten des Geistes* (“Homesteads of the Spirit”). These were historical-cum-spiritual studies of certain manifestations of sacred civilization, and covered such themes as Mount Athos, Celtic Ireland, Sinai, Constantinople, and other places. Burckhardt himself contributed the books entitled *Siena, City of the Virgin; Chartres and the Birth of the Cathedral*; and *Fez, City of Islam*. *Siena* is an enlightening account of the rise and fall of a Christian city which, architecturally speaking, remains “to this day something of a Gothic” jewel. Most interesting of all, however, is the story of its saints. Burckhardt devotes many of his pages to St. Catherine of Siena (who never hesitated to rebuke the Pope of her day, when she felt that it was necessary) and to St. Bernardino of Siena (who was one of the greatest Catholic practitioners—and teachers—of the saving power of the invocation of the Holy Name). *Chartres* is the story of the religious “idealism” (in the best sense of the word) which lay behind the conception and practical realization of the medieval Cathedrals—the still extant monuments to an age of faith. In *Chartres*, Burckhardt expounds the intellectual and spiritual contents of the different architectural styles—not merely distinguishing between the Gothic and Romanesque, but even between the different varieties of the Romanesque. It is a dazzling example of what is meant by intellectual discrimination.

One of Burckhardt several masterpieces is undoubtedly his *Fez, City of Islam*. As a young man, in the nineteen-thirties, he spent a few years in Morocco, where he established intimate friendships with several remarkable representatives of the as yet intact spiritual heritage of the

Maghrib. This was a formative period in Burckhardt's life, and much of his subsequent message and style originates in these early years. Already at the time concerned, he committed much of his experience to writing (not immediately published), and it was only in the late nineteen-fifties that these writings and these experiences ripened into a definitive and masterly book. In *Fez, City of Islam*, Burckhardt relates the history of a people and its religion—a history that was often violent, often heroic, and sometimes holy. Throughout it all runs the thread of Islamic piety and civilization. These Burckhardt expounds with a sure and enlightening hand, relating many of the teachings, parables, and miracles of the saints of many centuries, and demonstrating not only the arts and crafts of Islamic civilization, but also its “Aristotelian” sciences and its administrative skills. There is indeed much to be learnt about the governance of men and societies from Burckhardt's penetrating presentation of the principles lying behind dynastic and tribal vicissitudes—with their failures and their successes.

Close in spirit to *Fez*, is another of Burckhardt's mature works, namely *Moorish Culture in Spain*. As always, this is a book of truth and beauty, of science and art, of piety and traditional culture. But in this book, perhaps more than in all others, it is a question of the romance, chivalry, and poetry of pre-modern life.

During his early years in Morocco, Burckhardt immersed himself in the Arabic language and assimilated the classics of Sufism in their original form. In later years, he was to share these treasures with a wider public through his translation of Ibn ‘Arabi³ and Jili.⁴ One of his most important works of translation was of the spiritual letters of the renowned eighteenth-century Moroccan Shaikh Mulay al-‘Arabi ad-Darqāwī.⁵ These letters constitute a spiritual classic and are a precious document of practical spiritual counsel.

Burckhardt's last major work was his widely acclaimed and impressive monograph *Art of Islam*. Here the intellectual principles and the spiritual role of artistic creativity in its Islamic forms are richly and generously displayed before us. With this noble volume, the unique Burckhardtian literary corpus comes to its end.

Titus Burckhardt was like the right hand of Truth.

³ *La Sagesse des Prophètes (Fusus al-Hikam)*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1955.

⁴ *De l'Homme Universel (al-Insan al-Kamil)*, Derain, Lyons, 1953.

⁵ *Letters of a Sufi Master (Rasā'il)*, Perennial Books, Bedford, England, 1969.