



An Orthodox Critique of Perennialism (and René Guénon)

Categories : [Contemporary Issues](#), [Essays](#)

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A less known and I would say more subtle influence that seems to have afflicted many contemporary Orthodoxy theologians and thinkers in recent times is Perennialism. Perennialism as defined on Wikipedia, is a perspective on modern spirituality that views each of the world's religious traditions as sharing a single, metaphysical truth or origin from which all esoteric and exoteric knowledge and doctrine has grown.

From an Orthodox point of view this idea has some truth in it. We as Orthodox Christians understand that God has revealed Himself to mankind in a limited way and in its very simplistic approach it could be stated that all modern religions have some form of original Truth in them. The question though is how much of that truth is still present in various religions we see today and how Orthodox Christianity fits into this picture. This is especially important to examine, because putting this in the correct light will help us avoid the dangers of falling into the traps put forth by Perennialism currents today, especially its influence of the Ecumenist movement.

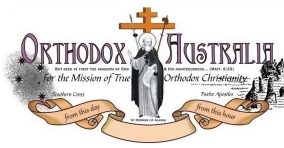
It is important to start this essay by noting that Perennialism is very close to the idea of branch theory Ecumenism is founded upon. Accordingly the Ecumenists of recent times argued that all Christian denominations have some form of Truth preserved in them and therefore are not completely devoid of grace. Just like the Perennialists try to go back to the origins and find that



"original metaphysical truth", the Ecumenists argue that all Christian denominations, including the Orthodox Church, have the same God which they need to rediscover.

The principal thinker of the Perennialist movement was René Guénon (a mason educated in jesuit schools from an early age), who like Fr Seraphim Rose seemed to be in search for the absolute Truth, but unlike him never found it. Considering the reasons stated above it is no wonder that his influence seems to have grown amongst many of the Orthodox theologians and high ranking clergy of today. The anti-Ecumenists have long argued that the main problem with Ecumenism is that it departs the idea that the Orthodox Church is the only True Church given to man by God in its complete form from its foundation. The Ecumenists argue that The Church is some entity in some sort of "continual spiritual search" (like all others) whose purpose is to lead man to a future unity with God which is to be discovered at a later point in time. Fr Seraphim Rose and Herman Podmoshenski identified this point as being "The Omega Point" as defined by another contemporary jesuit thinker, Teilhard de Chardin:

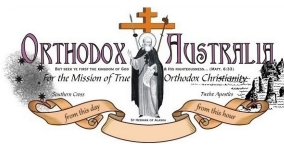
"At the same time that the universe is evolving into the Body of Christ, according to Teilhard de Chardin, man himself is reaching the pinnacle of his evolutionary development, which is called Super-Humanity. He says, "If...the evidence obliges our reason to accept that something greater than the man of today is in gestation upon the earth,...in order to be able to continue to worship as before we must be able to say to ourselves, as we look at the Son of Man, (not 'Apparuit humanitas,?' but) 'Apparuit uperhumanitas,?'"cclxviii let Super-Humanity appear. "Humanity would reach a point of development when it would detach itself altogether from the earth and unite with Omega, a phenomenon outwardly similar to death perhaps, but in reality simple metamorphosis and accession to the supreme synthesis."cclxix That is, this new state which is coming. He calls it the Omega Point, the point to which all the creation now is ascending." (quote from "Orthodox Survival Course")



Today we can find very few Orthodox resources that seem to offer a true spiritual seeker much light of why René Guénon's views are a real spiritual danger. One such critic was Philip Sherrard, a Perennialist (unfortunately) and member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Here is how he tried to refute René:

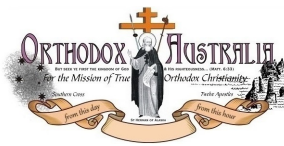
<http://thechristianmysteries.blogspot.com.au/2011/04/late-philip-sherrard-and-member-of.html>

"The late Philip Sherrard, a Perennialist and member of the Greek Orthodox Church, devotes a long chapter in his last book, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, to the "Logic of Metaphysics in René Guénon" – although the points he makes are just as applicable to Schuon, as we shall see. Guénon did more than anyone else to reawaken metaphysical perception in our century, Sherrard says. But he made two important assumptions that predisposed him against Christianity and towards Vedanta (and which help to explain his own conversion from Catholicism to Islam). The first of these assumptions was that a strict correlation must be preserved between the metaphysical and the logical order – thus ruling out in advance the more paradoxical Christian relationship between Unity and Trinity in the Godhead. The second assumption was that every "determination" of the Absolute must be some form of limitation, and is therefore incompatible with the divine nature. These two assumptions led Guénon into an apophaticism so radical that he could affirm nothing at all of the Absolute, except by way of negation – including, obviously, a negation of the Christian Trinity.



Before his death, then, Sherrard had come to the conclusion that a Christian thinker who accepts Revelation must start from an entirely different point of view – must begin, in fact, from the knowledge that the supreme Principle is the Trinity, and furthermore that “personality” (indeed, triple Personality) in God is not necessarily a limitation. Without it, in fact, the Absolute has no actual freedom to determine itself or create a world: the freedom of God becomes merely the absence of external constraint. Although Sherrard assumes Schuon’s “transcendental unity” approach throughout his book, this insight calls into question one of Schuon’s core teachings: that a personal (or Tri-Personal) deity derives from an impersonal Godhead and will be “dissolved” in the gnosis which transcends Being. (As Sherrard writes, “This view thus involves a total denial of the ultimate value and reality of the personal. It demands as a condition of metaphysical knowledge a total impersonalism – the annulment and alienation of the person.”)

Despite being a Perennialist, it appears though that towards the end of his life, Philip Sherrard (just like Vladimir Soloviev, who flirted with the philosophical ideas of this age and was under constant temptation to convert from Orthodoxy to catholicism, yet resisted it, and was granted by God in the last year of his life a revelation out of which came what we know today as "A Short Story of the AntiChrist" which BTW is a must read) did come to the realization that the major difference between Perennialism and Orthodoxy is Divine Revelation. While Perennialism is a rational way of seeking God and His wisdom, Orthodoxy is God's truth as revealed to man, even if not in its fullness, as in this fallen state it is not possible for man to fully know and understand God. Orthodox Christianity accepts this as a reality and doesn't seek to add anything more to it by means of



reason or human wisdom, but only through Divine Revelation. And this is the very idea of redemption and salvation - through Repentance and Divine Revelation man is revealed more of the nature of God. This Divine Revelation does not work for the humanity as a whole, but at individual level, according to that extent to which each individual human being can rid himself of sin and self in order to unite with God. It is very clear that Divine Revelation was given to mankind through various Holy Men and Women, who for their own "podvig" (spiritual struggle) were found worthy to be allowed to see more and more into the divine nature of God and confess it before others.

In contrast to this, the Perennialists argue that humanity is collectively in a struggle to find God and in some sort of a continual "spiritual evolution" which will in the end achieve the unity with divinity. It is obvious that such wrong beliefs can only lead to the revelation of the coming Antichrist and the promised "kingdom of heaven on Earth".

In order to contrast how human search of God differs to Divine Revelation is the example of the Three Magi. Although they were not even in the right faith, they had the correct spiritual disposition and humility before God, and thus found worthy to receive divine revelation about the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Similarly, let us only consider the personal experience of our blessed Father Seraphim Rose, who in one of his early letters admitted he was inspired by René Guénon in his search for finding the Truth, but it was Divine revelation that really got him on the right track:



"It so happens that Rene Guenon was the chief influence in the formation of my own intellectual outlook (quite apart from the question of Orthodox Christianity). I read and studied with eagerness all his books that I could get a hold of; through his influence I studied the ancient Chinese language and resolved to do for the Chinese tradition what he had done for the Hindu; I was even able to meet and study with a genuine representative of the Chinese tradition and understood full well what he means by the difference between such authentic teachers and the mere "professors" who teach in the universities.

It was Rene Guenon who taught me to seek and love the Truth above all else, and to be unsatisfied with anything else; this is what finally brought me to the Orthodox Church. Perhaps a word of my experience will be of help for you to know.

For years in my studies I was satisfied with being "above all traditions" but somehow faithful to them; I only went deeper into the Chinese tradition because no one had presented it in the West from a fully traditional point of view. When I visited an Orthodox Church, it was only in order to view another "tradition"-knowing that Guenon (and one of his disciples) had described Orthodoxy as the most authentic of the Christian traditions.



However, when I entered an Orthodox Church for the first time (a Russian Church in San Francisco), something happened to me that I had not experienced in any Buddhist or other Eastern temple; something in my heart said that this is "home," that all my search was over. I didn't really know what.. this meant, because the service was quite strange to me, and in a foreign language. I began to attend Orthodox services more frequently, gradually learning its language and customs, but still keeping all my basic Guenonian ideas about all the authentic spiritual traditions."

We can now clearly see why Orthodoxy is the only True Orthodox Church and why by not remaining deeply rooted in Her we become spiritual pray for the wisdom of this age, and today, more than ever, we need to be aware of these dangers. I'll just use a few short paragraphs from the Introduction Chapter of René Guénon's book "The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times" and offer some short commentaries to show how the humanity is being pushed towards a "global human consciousness" meant to replace God and how easy this is to be identified in the Perennialist philosophy. Although Teilhard de Chardin identified this new human consciousness as "Christ", it has in fact no resemblance with the Orthodox Christ, Who only came to the world to put us back on track and show us how far we had deviated from the truth back then. Again, the same wrong ideas as existed before Christ, are found today ready to derail the True Faith (Orthodoxy) once again.

So let me present just a few quotes René Guénon's most important book "[The Reign of Quantity](#)



[and the Signs of the Times":](#)

Quote: "... for everything that has any kind of existence, even error, has necessarily its reason for existence, and disorder itself must in the end find its place among the elements of universal order"

Observation: Reading just this in the Introduction Chapter it kind of strikes me thinking about where I believe the argument seems to be going - that which sees "disorder" (or chaos) as just a temporary state of the reality which leads to a greater state of order. This certainly is very interesting to note as it sounds very much in the same tone with the new age teachings of all the occult philosophies, and strikingly close to the idea of "order out of chaos". This in itself is not a strange idea to other similar teachings found in various "Christian" churches. The very idea of purgatory is probably very related to this concept, for it does away with the concept of hell as a permanent state of things and presenting it (hell) as a necessary step towards achieving a higher state (salvation). So from the very beginning we can observe that we are not presented with what Orthodoxy teaches as being a reality in which hell is a permanent state of disorder and chaos, and to where souls will be forever condemned, but just a transitory thing necessary for purification towards a higher spiritual state. This is very much the same thing as the idea of spiritual evolution towards the "omega point", in which disorder is seen as a necessary step.

And again:



Quote: "If our contemporaries as a whole could see what it is that is guiding them and where they are really going, the modern world would at once cease to exist as such, for the 'rectification' that has often been alluded to in the author's other works could not fail to come about through that very circumstance; on the other hand, since this 'rectification' presupposes arrival at the point at which the 'descent' is completely accomplished, where 'the wheel stops turning'- at least for the instant marking the passage from one cycle to another- it is necessary to conclude that, until this point is actually attained, it is impossible that these things should be understood by men in general, but only by the small number of those who are destined to prepare, in one way or in another, the germs of the future cycle. It is scarcely necessary to say that everything that the author has set out in this book and elsewhere is intended to be addressed exclusively to these few, without any concern for the inevitable incomprehension of the others; it is true that these others are, and still must be for a certain time to come, an immense majority, but then it is precisely in the 'reign of quantity', and only then, that the opinion of the majority can claim to be taken into consideration at all"

Observation: Here we can see again the idea of "order out of chaos". If one carefully examines this paragraph, the author seems to address to a "selected elite", or "the few who understand" that the world needs to be "allowed" to reach a new "low", or a "rectification point" where some sort of awakening of the masses occurs that mark the beginning of the "next step higher".

And again:

Quote: "It might appear that there is, in a sense, multiplicity at the two extreme points, in the same way as there is correlatively, as has just been pointed out, unity on the one side

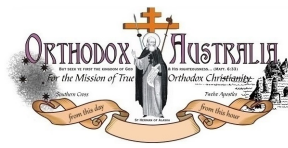


and 'units' on the other; but the notion of inverse analogy applies strictly here too, so that while the principia! multiplicity is contained in metaphysical unity, arithmetical or quantitative 'units' are on the other hand contained in the other and inferior multiplicity"

Observation: According to this we are supposed to "spiritually evolve" from the lower form of "inferior multiplicity" the the higher level of "superior unity", from a low form of "individual spirituality" to a higher form of "collective spirituality".

Conclusion: Are we not then to understand from these Perennialist ideals that the humanity is to prepare for a new step in its spiritual evolution from the current low, in which disorder is not to be looked at as a negative factor but as a catalyst for the next leg up towards a higher spiritual state, to which the masses that reach a new low in the "age of quantity" awaken, and then, led by the few enlightened, make a huge "step forward"? Have we not heard that before, is that not the new mission of the Orthodox Church as defined at the Synod in Crete and as highlighted in the numerous other articles and posts we at Orthodox Australia continually promote?

Just look at what Dan Brown has just said and see if this does not fall in line exactly with this sort of philosophy in which Christ is replaced with some form of a "global conscience of humanity", a "spiritual enhanced humanity"



<https://www.yahoo.com/news/collective-consciousness-replace-god-author-dan-brown-120033225.html>