

Every Branch in Me

Edited by Barry McDonald

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Reviewed by Harry Oldmeadow, published in *Australian Religion Studies Review*, 16:2, Spring 2003, pp182-186

In one of his many masterly essays, "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...on those unwilling to listen" (from *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, 1974, p28). *Every Branch in Me* is an anthology of essays, written from a perennialist perspective which seeks to reaffirm that "profound knowledge" of which the contemporary world remains so wilfully ignorant. This book is addressed not only to readers already familiar with the magisterial work of such figures as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Schuon, but also to those many people who sense the intellectual and spiritual sterility of the modern worldview but who are yet to discover the wellsprings of tradition.

The governing theme which knits together these diverse essays is the true nature of man's vocation. Nothing is more characteristic of modernity than the reductionistic and one-dimensional "definitions" of man which abound in the contemporary world, especially in the domains of sociology, psychology, and a rationalistic philosophy, not to mention the disastrous effects of a totalitarian evolutionism which so tyrannizes the modern mentality. As E.F. Schumacher remarked many years ago, "Nothing is more conducive to the brutalisation of the modern world than the launching, in the name of science, of wrongful and degraded definitions of man, such as 'the naked ape'" (*A Guide for the Perplexed*, 1977, p31). Needless to say, the fabrication of dehumanising social forms on the external plane depends on our assent to thought-forms which deny or distort our real nature.

The various authors assembled in *Every Branch of Me* seek to remind us of the human vocation wherein is to be found the deepest purpose and meaning of life, one which confers both dignity and responsibility. To put the matter in the spiritual vocabulary of the Occidental traditions one can say that the splendour of the human condition derives from our opportunity to realise that we are truly the sons and daughters of God, that we are made in His Image, that we might attain sanctity and become conduits through which God's grace flows into the world around us. Furthermore, as the editor of this volume reminds us, nothing that properly belongs to the human domain can be divorced from the life of the spirit. To put the same point slightly differently one might say that there is no human experience, no human situation, which is without a spiritual dimension and without spiritual possibilities—a verity of which the traditional worlds of both East and West were ever mindful and of which the contemporary world is ever forgetful.

Following a lucid and eloquent introduction by the editor, *Every Branch in Me* opens with a decisive essay by Frithjof Schuon, "To Have a Center" (taken from the book of the same title, 1990). Many readers will already be familiar with Schuon's peerless expositions of metaphysical principles and religious doctrines. However, this essay is of peculiar

significance as it is one of the few places where Schuon directly confronts some of the grotesqueries of modern, European "high culture". Within the context of what he elsewhere calls "a spiritual anthropology" (elaborated more fully in a later contribution to this anthology), Schuon exposes the profane and often Promethean pretensions of artists and "intellectuals" who have succumbed to the bogus philosophies and ideologies of modernity. The productions of post-medieval culture are, all too often, like so many luxuriant outgrowths of colourful but poisonous plants proliferating in the febrile hothouse of humanistic individualism. Discerning both the grandeur and the pathos of their ambitions, Schuon explains the tragic deflection from the human vocation of such figures as Beethoven, Wagner, Rodin, Nietzsche, Gauguin and Dostoevsky. Without denying their very considerable subjective resources and without ignoring the fact that they were sometimes "the bearers of incontestable values" (p14), Schuon shows how a humanistic culture, insofar as it has an ideological and pseudo-religious function, is rooted in a fundamental ignorance—of God's nature because it denies Him primacy, and of man who now usurps the position of God ("man is the measure of all things").

Schuon's reflections on 19th century bourgeois culture, marked on one side by a petty and "horizontal" mediocrity and on the other by a hubristic decadence, if one may so describe it, are followed by Thomas Yellowtail's ruminations on the destruction of a culture as far removed as imaginable from both the mediocre and the decadent. The extirpation of the Plains Indians' culture, pervaded by that sense of the sacred which marks all traditional civilizations, comprises one of the most ignominious vandalisms of modern times. The fate of the Indians themselves, so tragic and so poignant, reminds us of the destruction of traditional cultures all over the globe as the juggernaut of modernity crashes onwards. However, Chief Yellowtail's central purpose is not to sit in judgement of the perpetrators of these crimes but to reaffirm, in the inimitable idiom of the Indians, those spiritual values and principles which informed Indian life and which contrast so starkly with those of the modern secularized, industrialized and urbanized world. As Yellowtail states so directly, "Modern civilization has no understanding of sacred matters. Everything is backwards" (p31). This theme is taken up again in a later essay also concerned with the spiritual economy of the Indians, "On Being Human" by Joseph Epes Brown.

One of the most authoritative critics of modern science and scientism has been Titus Burckhardt and it is altogether appropriate that his contribution to *Every Branch in Me* should concern one of the most insidious forms of scientism intruding into a field in which it has no competence, thereby serving only to sow more seeds of confusion. One refers to the pretensions of a quasi-"scientific" psychology to "explain" the life of the spirit. In "Modern Psychology" Burckhardt shows how the theories of Carl Jung actually comprise a case of "psychism"—that confusion of spiritual realities and psychic phantasmagoria which was so ruthlessly exposed in Guenon's *Reign of Quantity* (1945). Burckhardt's critique of Jungian psychologism is followed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr's more wide-ranging arraignment of modern science which is contrasted with the *sacra scientia* of traditional civilisations. Many readers will already be familiar with the work of Professor Nasr, not only a leading Islamicist but a pre-eminent historian of science and a guiding light in the often confused debate about the "ecological crisis". Scientism, this time in the guise of evolutionism (hand-in-hand with its social accomplice, the pseudo-myth of Progress), is also the target of Huston's Smith's essay, "'Hope, Yes; Progress, No'".

The limited compass of a book review precludes any detailed commentary on all of the nineteen essays on offer here. But *Every Branch in Me* is full of treasures. One might mention Marco Pallis' fascinating reflections on "the significance of human attire" in "Do Clothes Make the Man?" or Lord Northbourne's sobering meditations on "The Survival of Civilization". Two subjects which have hitherto commanded only limited treatment by

traditionalist authors concern education and work, addressed here by William Stoddart and Brian Keeble respectively. (One might note in passing that one of the most illuminating of all commentators on these subjects was Ananda Coomaraswamy who is not represented in this particular anthology.) Another essay which deserves the attention of a much wider Western audience is James Cutsinger's arresting piece on the "problem" of religious pluralism, written from a Christian perspective and using both Patristic and Schuonian explications of the doctrine of Christ's "two natures" as a platform for reviewing Christian exclusivism. Many Christian folk of good will, exposed to the accumulated weight of centuries of a misdirected exclusivism, would derive immeasurable profit from this essay which affirms Christianity as one amongst many integral religious traditions.

Most of the authors mentioned above are, in varying degree, widely known by readers already familiar with the traditional outlook and with the implacable opposition to modernistic ideologies which is the inevitable corollary to any real understanding of those principles and values vehicled by traditional forms. Whilst no one will question the pre-eminence of such exponents of the traditional perspective as Schuon, Burckhardt and Nasr, it is particularly pleasing to see the work of less well-known authors represented in this volume. Some, like the Swedish philosophers Kurt Almquist and Tage Lindblom, belonged to the same generation as Schuon and Burckhardt, whilst Gray Henry, Patrick Laude, Mark Perry and editor Barry McDonald represent a younger generation of scholars and seekers who strive to carry on the work of such illustrious predecessors. Lilian Stavely (born circa 1878) was the author of *The Golden Fountain*, a recondite mystical work; it is good to find in this anthology an extract from her spiritual autobiography, *The Prodigal Returns*.

Every Branch in Me does not present itself as any kind of compendium; it does not seek to give us a representative sample of teachings taken from the world's major religious traditions. Nonetheless, one cannot help observing that the Eastern traditions are only lightly represented. True, there are a good few passing references to the East, but one would have been grateful for some more extended considerations of Oriental teachings about the human vocation. By way of illustrating the point one might adduce Coomaraswamy's profoundly important essay on "The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality" as the kind of piece which might usefully have complemented the material in this anthology, sitting comfortably alongside such essays as Jean Louis Michon's "The Vocation of Man According to the Koran". (Coomaraswamy's essay can be found in *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 1979.) Given the burgeoning Western interest in the traditions of the East, especially Buddhism, a contribution on the Buddhist understanding of "that state hard to attain" (the human realm) might also have served a useful purpose. But one does not want to resort to the well-worn stratagem of reviewers who are more concerned with what is not done than with what is actually in front of them. Nor should the various remarks above about the spiritual impoverishment of modernity be allowed to suggest that the intent of this anthology is essentially negative. The follies of modern thought, foregrounded in several essays, are only discussed in order to clear away those prejudices which obscure traditional teachings. The sovereign purpose of this anthology, as the editor reminds us, is to reawaken a sense of man's sacred vocation and thus to immunize us against "the despair and nihilism which are the final outcomes of the secular and relativist ideologies of our time" (pxi).

It might be said that the structure of *Every Branch in Me* is polyphonic: various melodies and motifs recur throughout, with each being inflected in new and different ways but always sustaining the central theme. The editor is to be commended on not only the selection of materials but their arrangement. Like all of the books produced by World Wisdom, this one has been meticulously and attractively produced.

Every Branch in Me is a most welcome addition to the library of perennialist works; indeed, it is the most significant anthology of its kind since *The Unanimous Tradition*

(Colombo, 1991, ed. Ranjit Fernando). It will return some readers to the sources from which these essays are taken while for others it will serve as an introduction to those riches which are to be found in the spiritual treasuries of the world's great religions. World Wisdom intend to publish a series of companion volumes on related themes, a development which we can await with the keenest anticipation. It is but rarely that one is able to review a book with unqualified enthusiasm —but here is one such occasion. The contemporary world stands in the most urgent need of that timeless wisdom which these authors have sought to re-express in a way which, even in these dark and troubled times, is accessible and intelligible. In so doing they offer us some signposts along the path we must travel if we are to be true to our human vocation.

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