

## Book Review

### *Light on the Ancient World*, by Frithjof Schuon (Perennial Books, 1965)

#### Review by Martin Lings

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This remarkable and deeply moving book certainly keeps the promise implicit in its title and the author goes straight to the heart of his subject. "Each ancient civilization can be said to live on a remembrance of the lost Paradise," we are told on the first page. This world-wide feature of antiquity needed to be stressed because so many writers on comparative religion lose sight of it; and yet without this "key" what attempt to understand the far past can hope to succeed? It is true that the lost Paradise is an essential feature of Christian doctrine also, but Christianity cannot possibly be said to live on its remembrance. Christians live on the memory of the second Adam not of the first, whose Paradise has long been no more than a "cold" prehistoric tradition, whereas for the ancient worlds it was still relatively "warm" in memory, not merely because it was nearer in years, but also because when the world was in its youth the memory of the collectivity was evidently far more retentive of the past. We have all "lived" the truth that the action of time is not uniform. In the youth of each microcosm it moves far more slowly and far less devastatingly: and so it must have been when the macrocosm was young. With reference to that long vanished youth the author says: "How was it that these old religions could deviate into paganism and then become extinct, whereas a similar destiny seems excluded in this case of the great traditions that are alive today in the West and in the East? The answer is that traditions having a prehistoric origin are, symbolically speaking, made for 'space' and not for 'time' ; that is to say, they saw the light in a primordial epoch when time was still no more than a rhythm in a spatial and static beatitude, and when space or simultaneity predominated over the experience of duration and change. The historical traditions on the other hand had to take the experience of

“time” into account and foresee instability and decadence, since they were born in periods when time had become like a fast-flowing river and ever more devouring, and when the spiritual outlook had to be centred on the end of the world.”

What makes the far past especially difficult for us to understand is that the decadence of the ancient civilizations has set itself up as a dark and rather impenetrable barrier between us and the zenith of their prime. A zenith is never ambiguous if looked at objectively, inasmuch as perfection means universality. But decadence is a triumph of the particular over the universal; and ancient decadence is on the face of it all the more incomprehensible to us for being so widely different from our own decadence. Such remarks as the following come therefore almost like answers to long unsolved riddles:

“It is as if they [the Babylonians and others who have left behind them overwhelmingly massive monuments] had seen the primordial beatitude evaporating and had therefore wanted to build a fortress, with the result that the spirit was stifled instead of being protected; seen from this angle the marmorean and inhuman side of these paganisms looks like a titanic reaction of space against time.”

Beyond the barriers of ancient decadence we are given more than one glimpse of pre-decadent antiquity. Particularly revealing in this respect is the chapter on “The Shamanism of the Red Indians.” As to the Fall itself which, however it may be represented, is the starting point of every religion, the author reminds us that it is only one particular link in the process of creation. “Moreover it is not everywhere presented as a ‘shortcoming’ but in certain myths it takes the form of an event unconnected with human or angelic responsibility. If there is a cosmos, a universal manifestation, there must also be a fall or falls, for to say ‘manifestation’ is to say ‘other than God’ and ‘separation.’”

This book is, amongst other things, a powerful reminder of the dangers of cosmic illusion which the Hindus term *Mâyâ*. One of the characteristics of modern man is that he has almost entirely lost the sense of *Mâyâ* — a sense which the ancients all seem to have possessed in varying degrees.

“A meaningless knowledge, a knowledge to which we have no right either by virtue of its nature, or of our capacities, and therefore by virtue of our vocation, is not a knowledge that enriches but one that impoverishes.... We must distrust the fascination which an abyss can exert over us; it is in the nature of cosmic blind-alleys to seduce and to play the vampire; the current of forms does not want us to escape from its hold. Forms can be snares just as they can be symbols and keys; beauty can chain us to forms, just as it can also be a door opening towards the formless.”

As regards the Western world in general, the difficulties of access to that door were enormously increased at the Renaissance which was one of the great triumphs of *Mâyâ*.

“In losing a symbolist and contemplative perspective founded on impersonal intelligence and on the metaphysical transparency of things, man gained the fallacious riches of the *ego*.... In all cases of this kind, heaven — or a heaven — is shut off from above us without our noticing the fact and we discover in compensation an earth long unappreciated, or so it seems to us, a homeland which opens its arms to welcome its children and wants to make us forget all lost Paradises; it is the embrace of *Mâyâ*, the sirens’ song; *Mâyâ*, instead of guiding us imprisons us. The Renaissance thought that it had discovered man, whose pathetic convulsions it admired; from the point of view of laicism in all its forms, man as such had become to all intents and purposes good, and the earth too had become good and looked immensely rich and unexplored; instead of living only “by halves” one could at last live fully, be fully man and fully on earth; one was no longer a kind of half-angel, fallen and exiled; one had become a whole being, but by the downward path.”

A chapter entitled “Reflections on Naivety” begins:

“A naïve outlook is often attributed to everyone who lived in the past. There is no simpler way of exalting oneself.... But people who reproach our ancestors for having been stupidly credulous forget in the first place that one can also be stupidly incredulous, and in the second place that the self-styled destroyers of illusion live on illusions that exemplify a credulity second to none. A simple credulity can be replaced by a complicated one, adorned with the arabesques of a studied doubt that forms part of the style, but it is still credulity; complication does not make error less false nor stupidity less stupid.”

Let us quote also, in the same connection:

“Ways of thinking and acting which may sometimes throw us off the track by their appearance of ingenuousness often — and especially in the lives of the saints — conceal an efficacy that is for that very reason all the more profound.... For what matters is not the question of knowing whether the dialectic or the demeanour of Plato or of anyone else is naïve or not...but exclusively the fact that the sage or the saint has an inward access to concrete Truth; the most unpretentious formulation — doubtless the most childish in some people’s eyes — can be the threshold of a Knowledge as complete and profound as any knowledge can be.”

The next chapter, “Man in the Universe,” adds the vertical dimension to a vast horizontal vista which, thanks to light both *on* and *from* the ancient worlds, stretches back unbroken from the present into the farthest past. Not that this vertical dimension has been absent from the earlier chapters, nor indeed is it ever absent from the author’s writings, but it is explicitly the theme of this chapter; and having thus glimpsed as it were something of the true “measurements” of being, we are shown in the two unforgettable final chapters, “The Universality of Monasticism” and “Religio Perennis,” that man was made, precisely, to fill to the brim that universal “space,” if only he will live up to *his* true measurements.