

Femininity, Hierarchy, and God

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There are at least two different ways of discussing ideas. The first might be called the horizontal approach, and it is by far the more common in academic settings. The writer puts himself in the background, his own views aside, and attempts to describe what others have thought. He may if he is especially brave venture a concluding surmised or tentative evaluation of his data, but he is careful to respect the pluralism of the scholarly world, and he therefore avoids raising suspicions that he has committed himself. We are all familiar with this method. There is, however, a second (albeit rarer) possibility, and that is to approach an idea or a set of ideas as true—one may say “as if it *were* true” (if he still wishes to be cautious) or “because it *is* true” (if he does not mind being called “dogmatic”). Here, too, the writer will wish to stay in the background; it is not after all his thinking a thing true that makes it true. But the foreground is occupied in this “vertical” case not so much by the bibliographies and periods and academic generalities with which he is familiar, but by the ideas themselves—essentially naked, cut free from their historical contexts and considered of value only insofar as they may point us toward the Real.

My approach in this chapter is a combination of both these methods. I intend on the one hand to describe a particular school of thought, the perennialist or traditionalist school, as represented by three twentieth century metaphysical authors: Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, and—especially—Frithjof Schuon. And I plan to emphasize in particular their views of the feminine and the role femininity plays in their critique of modern thought. On the other hand, it is not my intention to present their ideas simply as historical curiosities. I wish for the reader to look not *at* but *through* their thinking and *along* their claims toward a fresh recognition of certain truths. I have accordingly avoided the customary qualifications and scholarly provisos. It is hoped

that this will prove useful particularly for those whose interests would not otherwise have brought them into contact with these authors or with perennialism, and for whom certain textual and biographical details might be irrelevant, but who may nevertheless be concerned with the deeper religious and philosophical issues suggested by my title. In any case, my chief intention here—like that of my fellow authors—is to provoke readers to ask, not whether what I say about Schuon and the other perennialists is in keeping with their books, but whether what they say (in this case) about femininity, hierarchy, and God is in keeping with Reality.¹

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Penetration to the heart of their thinking will be made easier by noting first that several terms so far employed are dangerously misleading. Whatever the traditionalist school may be, it is not a “school of thought”; and if perennialism is anything, it is not merely an “-ism”. Though the writers in question themselves sometimes speak in these more familiar and more academically acceptable ways, and though the demands of a formal essay will require that I, too, continue to use such language from time to time, their distinctive and persistent intention is in fact to transcend the bounds of schools, perspectives, and opinions. For the perennial ideas they seek to express emerge from a Source independent of the sundry schools and systems manufactured by the human mind.

Theirs, they say, is a *sophia perennis*, a perennial wisdom or philosophy, which is the substance of truth common to all the world's major religions. Words ending in the suffix ‘-ism’ are always the derivatives of adjectives, and what they designate is therefore inevitably abstract and lacking a substance or integrity of its own. The ideas that we are considering here, however, are utterly the opposite, for the perennial philosophy is the cause and origin of derivations, and not in any sense their result.

The defense of this claim—this very arrogant and presumptuous claim, some may be tempted to add—depends above all on a single, fundamental principle, which the traditionalists repeatedly emphasize throughout their prose: the principle, namely, that man is much more than a body and mind and that his knowledge extends—*de jure* if not

de facto—far beyond the heuristic ideas abstracted by reason from the physical senses. Anthropologies of this latter sort will of course inevitably resist as the merest dogmatism all assertions of the kind I have sketched, all claims presuming to be free from the “conditioning” of history and culture. Such is not the perennialist anthropology, however. According to Schuon, Coomaraswamy, and Guénon, man is a ternary being, tripartite in his essential structure, comprising not only the body and mind of Cartesian dualism, but also a third element, the Intellect or Spirit. This last transcends the individual person as such and is not so much a human faculty as it is a mode or a level of being, which embraces and grounds a person, together with the history of which his mind and body are parts, instead of being embraced or comprehended by him. By virtue of Intellect, man can know with certainty what truly is—he can discern and assess the full range of being—for the Intellect and Reality are in fact a single substance, a single, undivided, and indivisible plenitude.

Now to speak of a level of knowing and being that transcends the individual person is to speak, of course, of hierarchy, an idea introduced in my title, and one to which we must now turn directly. For more than any other, the idea of an ontological hierarchy, as conveyed by the image of “the great chain of being”, has provided the perennialists with their essential and most distinctive teachings. These authors are agreed above all that something and nothing, being and its absence, are not the only alternatives—that “to be” or “not to be” is *not* the question—but that Reality is a matter of degrees, emerging at its highest level from a Source or Principle *so* real as to be better called “Supra-ontological” or “Beyond-Being”. This divine Principle is too full of the Real to contain itself; superabundantly, it spills over its own most proper nature, first into itself and then “outside”, in what Saint Bonaventure called the self-diffusiveness of the Good. In their upper registers, the levels of this self-diffusion, manifestation, or emanation from the Principle are immaterial and not yet quantified. But the process of manifestation inevitably leads toward a coagulation, solidification, and division of being as lower reaches of the hierarchy are approached, with matter as we know it, hard and resisting, being the densest level of all and the terminal point of the entire movement.

The perennialists add that manifestation is at once intrinsic and extrinsic to the Principle or Source, for the Principle is at once infinite and absolute, hence immanent

and transcendent. As infinite, that is, having no bounds, the Source can never be removed or detached from anything real. To exist is to participate in the Principle, which comprehends or contains Reality in all of its many levels, from the seraphim to stones. On the other hand, being absolute and self-caused, the Source or Supreme Reality remains above and beyond all contingencies and accidents, which is to say outside the world and totally other than everything not itself. Schuon expresses this crucial metaphysical insight in the following way:

Esoterically speaking, there are only two relationships to take into consideration, that of transcendence and that of immanence: according to the first, the reality of Substance [that is, the Principle] annihilates that of the accident; according to the second, the qualities of the accident—starting with their reality—cannot but be those of Substance.²

Or again he writes: “The universe is . . . a veil which on the one hand exteriorizes the Essence [this again is the Principle] and on the other hand is situated within the Essence itself, inasmuch as it is Infinitude.”³

As the term “veil” implies, this relationship between the world and its ultimate Origin is captured best, perhaps, in the Hindu *Mâyâ*, which both reveals and conceals the supreme reality of *Brahman*—which in fact veils and conceals precisely in order to reveal. For according to the perennial philosophy, the world actually manifests the Principle only insofar as attention is not diverted or attracted by the manifestation itself, that is, by the creature, whose sole function is to empty itself in the direction of God, in order in turn to empty those who look upon it of all that separates them from their Source. As we shall see, the feminine is at the very center of this recollective process. Though the Divine is fully present in creatures, it is only paradoxically so, for it makes itself most present through absence—through precisely those features of creation by which the world testifies, even in the midst of its greatest beauty, that it is not itself God. Only thus, by expressing itself best in its silence, does the Principle recall our awareness of both transcendence and immanence.

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With these basic teachings in mind, treating them not of course as proofs or demonstrations, but simply as supports for further reflection, I would have us turn now to the place of the feminine in the perennial philosophy.

“Gender is a reality,” C. S. Lewis has written, speaking from a traditional Christian perspective,

and a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings. Female sex is simply one of the things that have feminine gender; there are many others, and Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would be simply meaningless. Masculine is not attenuated male, nor feminine attenuated female. On the contrary, the male and female of organic creatures are rather faint and blurred reflections of masculine and feminine. Their reproductive functions, their differences in strength and size, partly exhibit, but partly also confuse and misrepresent, the real polarity.⁴

Now according to the perennialist school, this “real polarity” is to be found, not only as Lewis suggests in creatures, however superhuman, but all the way up to and in the Divine Reality itself, in what we have been calling the Principle, which is the ultimate Source of everything else and which is for that reason the source and paradigm of all distinctions.

In its absoluteness and transcendence, the Divine is the archetype for everything masculine, while its infinity and capacity for immanence are displayed at every level of the feminine. Though such ideas will appear to the skeptic as fantasy, projection, or pathetic fallacy, the polar qualities revealed to us as sex are actually and objectively present on every plane of the ontological hierarchy, above us as already suggested, as in the relationship of sun to moon, but also below, in certain alchemical pairs, like gold and silver, or in physical states, like solid and liquid—the former term in each of these pairs signifying an expression of what the Chinese call *yang* or masculine power, and the latter of *yin*, which is the feminine energy. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written, “The difference between the two sexes cannot be only biological and physical, because in the traditional perspective the corporeal level of existence has its principle in the subtle state, the subtle in the spiritual, and the spiritual in the Divine being itself.”⁵ To put the point in western theological terms, man and woman are both created in the divine image and are therefore equally theomorphic. “Each sex,” says Schuon, “represents a perfection.”⁶ Or again, in a less theological and more metaphysical

language, we have the words of Coomaraswamy: “‘That’ . . . of which our Powers are measures . . . is a syzygy of conjoint principles.”⁷

I have been speaking of the masculine and feminine as qualities and energies, but a note of warning is important lest these words deceive us. Qualities in this case are not “attributes”; they are not, in other words, characteristics or distinguishing features that are simply attached by convention to certain visible or tangible objects, to be then abstracted or prescinded from them. For the traditionalist, the true order is just the reverse. Visible and tangible things exist only by virtue of their inherence or participation in the qualities and only by dependence on them. The nominal represents a condensation of the adjectival. Masculine and feminine, as C. S. Lewis observed, are not attenuated male and female, but veritable realities in their own right, rooted in the Divine itself. Only by keeping this teaching in mind can one begin to understand the place of the feminine in perennialism. Unlike the typical theologian of the classical West, for whom God has been primarily “He”, the traditionalist repeatedly insists that both the masculine and the feminine are indispensable revelations or, as Schuon would say, “prolongations” of the Divine Source, and hence that male and female equally speak of God from within the physical and organic world of humans sensibility. On the other hand, though they do speak equally, what they have to say is not the same nor hierarchically equivalent, and it is in this respect, until one looks more closely, that perennialism may appear to be unjust or chauvinistic to modern eyes. I shall return to this crucial point later.

Traditionalist doctrine includes three distinct polarities of the masculine and feminine, three patterns of relationship, of which we have so far glanced at only two. On the one hand, these twin qualities are the expression of powers or energies intrinsic to the Divine itself, for God is both absolute and infinite, just and merciful, “rigorous” and “gentle”,⁸ “inviolable” and “generous.”⁹ Thus, as Schuon says, “The Supreme Divinity is either Father or Mother.”¹⁰ On the other hand, since the universe is the creation of God, or the manifestation of the Principle, this polarity within the Divine is ineluctably extended “outside” as well, into that universe which is both within and without its Source. Hence, the supreme complementarity is duplicated on every plane of existence, whether angelic or astrological, human or animal, vegetable or mineral.

Masculine and feminine are embodied, moreover, not only among the kinds or species of creatures, but in various created forces and natural laws, and in certain pairs of human faculties: in “contraction” and “expansion”,¹¹ “geometry” and “music”,¹² and “knowledge” and “love”.¹³ We should note that in both of these first two respects, whether we consider the polarity as within the Principle or as within its manifestation, the two poles or qualities are complementary, reciprocal, and symmetric. They are, as it were, horizontally equal.

It should come as no surprise, however, that a metaphysics as hierarchical as the perennial philosophy also stresses certain vertical applications of this fundamental pair, nor perhaps is it surprising to discover that in most such instances—I do emphasize “most”—the feminine is subordinate to the masculine.

This third, vertical order of relationship pertains not to complements inside or outside the Divine Reality, but to opposites that bridge this very distinction and that express in this way the union of God and creatures. Here the most distinctive characteristic of the masculine power is said to be its initiative and activity and of the feminine, its receptivity and passivity. Heaven is masculine in relation to earth, and immanence is feminine with respect to transcendence; essence or form is *yang*, substance or matter is *yin*. Indeed this vertical relationship of the genders is an essential feature of the ontological hierarchy. As Coomaraswamy writes, “The fundamental distinction in terms of sex defines the hierarchy. God himself is male to all.”¹⁴ We shall see shortly, however, that this observation is not the whole story.

As already mentioned, the concept of *Mâyâ*, linked by etymological associations to both *materia* or matter and *mater* or mother, is an especially important idea in the traditionalist understanding of the created universe. Says Schuon of *Mâyâ*, “She is the great theophany, the ‘unveiling’ of God. . . . *Mâyâ* may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is a quasi-incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite.”¹⁵ *Mâyâ* in fact is the presence of the Infinite in the finite, the projection of the Divine’s own internal femininity, that is, infinity, outside itself, an “outside” which, in its dependence, contingency, and indefiniteness, not only contains but constitutes the feminine.

All the characteristics normally associated with *Mâyâ*, those of play, relativity, and

illusion, constellate, for the perennialists, around the feminine, and they may be turned, we are taught—like those of the masculine—either toward the service of the Principle or against it: either, in other words, toward recalling creatures to their Source or toward blinding, distracting, and deceiving them. As Coomaraswamy describes it, “*Mâyâ* . . . is the maternal measure and means essential to the manifestation of a . . . world of appearances, by which we may be either enlightened or deluded according to the degree of our own maturity.”¹⁶ It is to the former possibility, to the beneficent, “Beatrician”, or “Marian” aspect of the feminine as theophany, and to its central role in the perennialist critique of modernism, that I shall soon be directing attention. The traditions warn, however, that this quality, like its masculine counterpart, also possesses certain maleficent capabilities and deceptive extremes, which cannot but predominate if the feminine is abstracted from its proper dogmatic and liturgical contexts and considered outside the protective limits of an orthodox tradition. If I discuss here only the positive applications of femininity, it is not to forget that much else would need saying before a truly perennial evaluation of the genders could be reached.

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At this point, however, I must interrupt our considerations of the feminine proper and say a few words about what is meant in this context by the term “modernism”. If we are to understand the value of femininity in the perennialist challenge to modern thought, we obviously need first to be clear just what that thought is.

When authors like Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and Schuon speak of the modern worldview, which they trace roughly from the end of the western Middle Ages, what they have in mind essentially is a viewpoint that is lacking in hierarchical order. The modernist vision is a reductionist vision, a way of seeing and interpreting all reality as if it existed on a single level, and thus a tendency to ignore or reject those dimensions of being that refuse to conform to that chosen plane. It is a view of the more in terms of the less. Although one might object that modern scientific distinctions among the physical, chemical, and biological orders of existence are in one sense a function of planes or levels, these planes are nevertheless all confined to the material and empirical

order. No modern scientist would ever speak, as do the perennial philosophers of their hierarchy, as though some of these organizational levels were more “real” than others. Moreover, when it comes to a consideration of mind or consciousness, the modern view has completely reversed or inverted the traditional perspective, since matter is regarded by the modern thinker, not as the result, but as the cause of mind.

For the sake of this brief summary, I am obviously neglecting important exceptions to this rule—thinkers who, though modern by traditional measures, would nevertheless attribute to the mind more than an epiphenomenal status and who would consider consciousness as possessing an integrity of its own. And yet surely the perennialists are right that very few even of these philosophers take the further step of realizing that consciousness is itself the cause of matter, and they are right, too, that no one who is by definition “modern” will be prepared to recognize in the human mind the echo or reverberation of yet higher, non-human modes of awareness. I should emphasize that term “modern” is being used here, as it is by Schuon and others of the traditionalist school, to describe a view or philosophical perspective, and not a period or age, though certainly the word is meant to suggest that the perspective in question has been the more typical and dominant in recent times. Nevertheless, we are not to infer that a person who is chronologically modern cannot be traditional, or there would be no living perennialists.

Modernism can be characterized as the result, or better perhaps as the intersection, of several similar tendencies, all of them reflecting in various ways the assumed centrality and apparent inescapability of matter. These several tendencies may be called, following Guénon, reduction, quantification, and solidification. It is the last that especially concerns us here. According to the traditionalist assessment, the dominance of materialistic ontologies and empiricistic epistemologies in our time has resulted from a certain coarsening, hardening, or condensation in man’s perception of the world. This solidification has exhibited itself both subjectively, in an excessive individualism or egoism, whereby man tends to conceive of himself as a closed and insulated entity, locked as it were within his physical body; and objectively, in a positivistic search for fundamental particles and elementary natural laws. This solidification is perhaps most strikingly obvious in the mechanistic applications of modern science. But it is also

more subtly and destructively present in the conformation of man's understanding of himself to the contours and structures of empirical objects, so great is his fascination with technology and its apparent successes. According to Guénon, "Modern man has become quite impermeable to any influences other than such as impinge on his senses; not only have his faculties of comprehension become more and more limited, but also the field of his perception has become correspondingly restricted."¹⁷ Thinking has been identified with the belief that what we know—if we know anything at all—is ultimately derived from what our natural senses tell us and that any idea worth serious consideration must in some way or at some level of practicality be applicable to the world disclosed by physical perception. All nonmaterial phenomena that are inexplicable in material terms have been reduced in this way to the domain of the subjective and psychological.

For the traditionalists, modern thought means in short the persistent preference and substitution of the opaque for the transparent and the eclipse, therefore, of quality by quantity, of the higher by the lower, and of the spiritual by matter—the eclipse, in other words, of the Divine Reality by creatures. Though he seems not to know it and usually resists the charge, modern man has become riveted upon phenomena, which he no longer even realizes *are* phenomena, that is, appearances of another Substance, but which he treats instead as integral realities. Thus according to Schuon:

One finds in modern thinking a significant abuse of both the idea of the abstract and the idea of the concrete, the one error being evidently allied to the other. All reality not physically or psychologically tangible, although perfectly accessible to pure intellection, is described as being "abstract" with a more or less disparaging intention, as though it were a matter of distinguishing between dream, or even deception, and reality or healthiness of mind. Substance, that which exists of itself, is regarded as "abstract", and the accidental as "concrete."¹⁸

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We come at this point, not to the place, but to the specific operative role of the feminine in the perennialist challenge to modernism—what I have called the theophanic value of femininity and its recollective power.

It will be helpful to recall the traditional identification of the feminine with *Mâyâ*. Like *Mâyâ*, we saw, the feminine involves illusion, concealing in the midst of revealing and revealing by way of concealing. At first glance, this feature of the feminine quality may seem merely deceptive and deluding. But for the perennialist, while the negative and occluding dimensions of the divine play must always be remembered and carefully guarded against, illusions nevertheless remain of inestimable liberating value, especially in the recollection to their Principle of minds that have become too masculine, which is to say too fixed, too externalized, too heavy, too determinate and “solid”; perhaps we can now say too “modern”. Unlike both accurate perceptions, on the one hand, and hallucinations, on the other, illusions are a combination of being and nothing, of something and its absence. For they register things that truly are, though never quite as they are. So too the feminine. And it is in precisely this way, because of its gift of illusion—its liquidity, flexibility, and openness—that femininity is uniquely qualified to represent the ultimate Source of things to the self-imprisoned mind. For that Source, let us remember, is both transcendent and immanent, and it is therefore always other than itself in its sameness—always beyond creatures even while being within them.

Schuon discerns this illusory nature even at the level of the female physical form, and he therefore observes: “As symbols, the masculine body indicates a victory of Spirit over chaos, and the feminine body, a deliverance of form by Essence.” For the feminine, he continues, “is like celestial music which would give back to fallen matter its paradisiacal transparency, or which, to use the language of Taoism, would make trees flower beneath the snow.”¹⁹ As he elsewhere writes, “The key to the mystery of salvation through . . . femininity lies in the very nature of *Mâyâ*: If *Mâyâ* can attract toward the outward, she can also attract towards the inward. Eve is life, and this is manifesting *Mâyâ*; Mary is Grace, and this is reintegrating *Mâyâ*.”²⁰ Or again Schuon says:

The beauty of woman appears to man as the revelation of the bliss of the Essence, of which he is himself as it were a crystallization—and in this respect femininity transcends man—and this explains the alchemical role and the “dissolving” power of woman’s beauty: the vibratory shock of the aesthetic event—in the deepest sense of the word—should be the means of “liquefaction of the hardened heart.”²¹

It is thus that the feminine, by its expansive and dissolving power, may serve to awaken modern minds by drawing their attention away from the edge and surface of things into their liquid heart and substance. Wishing to leave no one satisfied with the apparent fixities and givens of corporeal manifestation, the perennialists look to the feminine, as Coleridge would have said, “to arouse and emancipate the soul from this debasing slavery to the outward senses”²²—in other words, to liberate the human intelligence from its complacency and from the arbitrary constraints of seeming solids. Says Schuon, “Woman . . . in her highest aspect . . . is the formal projection of merciful and infinite Inwardness in the outward; and in this regard she assumes a quasi-sacramental and liberating function.”²³

This magnetic and deliquescent force of femininity has the power to do even more, however, than, by melting surfaces, to draw our hearts inside of things. The feminine may also function in such a way as to elevate, to persuade the mind up the ladder of being on to higher and higher levels. This elevating role is exercised in two distinct ways and at two specific levels of the ontological hierarchy, which we may call the spiritual and the Divine.

In order to understand the first, the spiritual operation or function, it is important to remember our earlier discussion of the masculine and feminine as powers within the Principle itself, whose manifestation requires that descending levels of cosmic radiation be polarized in turn. In its transcendence and absoluteness, we said, the Principle is masculine, while its bounty, self-diffusiveness, or infinity disclose a feminine dimension. Now because it is allied to God’s infinitude, which ensures that the Source is everywhere, the Divine feminine proves also to be, conversely, what enables beings not divine to participate in God. Femininity, in other words, is the capacity that the Principle has, having passed outside itself, to embrace what it is not, which is to say that which *is* not, so as to provide mere nothings with the dignity of being. The feminine is the connecting thread between manifestation and its Source—a Source that would otherwise, as masculine and absolute, remain utterly apart and unapproachable. The feminine quality thus functions as cause, not only for the act of creation, but for its providential preservation, sustenance, and continuity. And in this sustaining and

connecting role, it is able to lift man's awareness beyond the level of the material, and even subtle, orders all the way up to the Principle itself. As an expression of God's merciful condescension or benignity, the feminine "familiarizes" creatures with their Maker. As Schuon writes, "It is not possible to go beyond Relativity . . . without the acquiescence and help of the Divine Relative,"²⁴ and this Relative is the feminine.

There is a second role, however, that is even more important if modern man would be freed from his prison. It is a role enacted at the level of the Divine Reality itself, where the opening and liberating actions of the feminine are intended to conduct man past both the subtle and the spiritual orders up and into the Principle *per se*. We have seen that femininity, as the infinite dimension of the Source, carries the power to lead the mind toward God. Perennialists teach even more strikingly, however, that creatures may be led past the frontiers as it were of God and into his own deepest recesses—into, in fact, the Source or Origin of God himself. For according to traditional doctrine, hierarchy applies in a sense even to the very Principle of hierarchy, and not simply to the planes of reality below it. It is possible to distinguish levels of divinity, even degrees (strange as it sounds to say) of absoluteness. Moreover, one may assign to the highest and most ultimate of these levels the quality of the feminine; it is possible to say, in other words, that femininity is the Source or Origin of the determinate personality, hence the masculinity, of God himself. I observed before that in most of its vertical applications, the perennial philosophy subordinates the feminine to the masculine, and an example of that rule has since been remarked. I had in mind, however, and wished to anticipate, the present most important exception. For even though, in Schuon's words, "virility refers to the Principle, and femininity to Manifestation,"²⁵ the Principle is not only virile. Instead, the masculinity of the Divine Person proves in the final analysis to be an echo or reflection of an even more ultimate Source.

This is the Source that I described earlier as being in some senses so real as to be better called, not being, but Beyond-Being. It is the *shunyâta* or Void of Buddhist teaching and the Supra-ontological Essence invoked by Dionysius the Areopagite. "Beyond-Being—or Non-Being—is Reality absolutely unconditioned," according to Schuon, "while Being is Reality insofar as It determines Itself in the direction of

manifestation and in so doing becomes personal God.”²⁶ The point to attend to now, however, is the close association the traditionalist authors draw between this supreme and unsurpassable dimension of the Divine and femininity. Coomaraswamy is perhaps the most succinct of all: the Supreme Reality, he says, “is of Essence and Nature, Being and Nonbeing, God and Godhead—that is, masculine and feminine.”²⁷ This identification must be clearly understood. The perennialist teaching is not only that there exists a feminine aspect within the Divine. It is that the feminine takes a certain precedence in relation to God the creator, even as the masculinity of that God himself takes precedence with respect to creation. The impassibility and sovereignty of God as described in the exoteric Western traditions are seen to be the veils or projections of something other and higher, which, utterly unlike all manifested qualities and unsusceptible to every category, even that of being itself, remains in its very fluidity and indeterminacy rather more like the feminine than like anything else.²⁸ Schuon writes accordingly:

Even though *a priori* femininity is subordinate to virility, it also comprises an aspect which makes it superior to a given aspect of the masculine pole; for the divine Principle has an aspect of unlimitedness, virginal mystery, and maternal mercy which takes precedence over a certain more relative aspect of determination, logical precision, and implacable justice.²⁹

And he notes that “a Sufi, probably Ibn Arabi, has written that the Divine Name ‘She’ (*Hiya*), not in use but nevertheless possible, is greater than the Name ‘He’ (*Huwa*). This refers to the Indetermination or Infinitude, both virginal and maternal, of the Self or ‘Essence’ (*Dhât*).”³⁰ The femininity of Non-being or Beyond-Being can thus be considered, at least in this context, as the Principle of the Principle, as constituting and deploying the very divinity of God himself, and as administering what must surely be the final alchemical shock to those who are content with what exists—the ultimate subversion of their complacency, because the ultimate implosion or intussusception of “that which is”.³¹

But now for a word of caution as I bring this chapter to a close. None of my observations has been meant to suggest that the Divine is without masculine aspects that may be in certain cases more crucial or more decisive than the feminine, or that the perennialists are not prepared to emphasize these aspects when necessary. If these have not been stressed in the present context, it is simply because to do so would be to write another essay. Nor do I wish to leave the reader thinking that the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have somehow been wrong—*quad absit*—to place their emphasis on God as a “He”. Quite the contrary, exoteric and dogmatic emphases, whether in the form of doctrines, symbols, or rituals, would seem—at least in the Western context—to be peculiarly inappropriate and disproportionate to the quality, dimension, or “energy” we have been considering here. For as the traditionalists see it, the operative power and true efficacy of the feminine consist precisely in its hiddenness, indirection, and unspecifiable amplitude, which would only be compromised if placed in the foreground. Nevertheless, at the risk of seeming to define the indefinable or of appearing to promote a competing religion—and this manifestly is not their intention—they believe as well that the characteristic tendencies and preconceptions of the modern world have made it important for us to attend more closely than before to the importance of femininity as an expression of the Real.

For ours, they insist, is an era of density and hardness, of heaviness and eclipse: It is the *Kali Yuga* or “Dark Age”. The doors of our perception having *not* been cleansed, men and women have come not merely to doubt or disbelieve but to deny the reality of higher worlds. Or if they do still believe, their faith is without the traditional complement of knowledge and reason, and is directed toward a realm of shadows, seemingly no more real, and often less, than the plane of matter, whose phenomenal contingency and fragility they seldom glimpse, and then forget. “In this state,” warns Schuon, “The soul is at the same time hard as stone and pulverized as sand; it lives in the dead rinds of things and not in the Essence, which is Life and Love; it is at once hardness and dissolution.”³²

What such a soul needs, what modern man needs, is a means of melting—what Schuon calls a “spiritual liquefaction of the ego”.³³ And for this it needs the feminine. Theophanic, maieutic, recollective, and freeing, the role of the feminine is to transport a

mind grown too attached and masculine from exterior through interior to superior, by exposing that mind—again in the words of Schuon—to “the warm, soft quality of spring, or that of fire melting ice and restoring life to frozen limbs”.³⁴

Two concluding observations. It is important to emphasize first, lest there be some confusion, that for the perennialists the masculine is never exclusively the privilege or possibility of the human male, not the feminine of the female. As Schuon says, “Each sex, being equally human, shares in the nature of the other.”³⁵ Because they are contingencies and accidents, creatures—including human creatures—are by their very nature always other than themselves, impure and mixed. Only in the Divine Reality are the polar qualities distinctly “placed”, with specific and persistent operations of their own. In human beings, they inevitably overlap, with *yang* and *yin* expressing their powers through males and females both. It is rather a question of predominance. And yet even so, as suggested before several times, men and women do remain in some sense emblematic of their corresponding archetypes, and they are therefore, even at the level of their physical bodies, hierarchically complementary revelations of their ultimate Principle. This fact cannot be without implications for how we live our lives.

My reference yet again to hierarchy brings in its train a second and final comment. As readers should by now have realized, relationships between the masculine and the feminine are for the perennialists anything but simple or static. Sometimes “horizontal” and sometimes “vertical”, they are never “democratically” related. For even though these twin qualities are equally revelatory, and though through them male and female equally speak of God, they do not speak equally of God, for what they have to say is not the same, nor in the traditionalist view are men and women ever equivalent, that is, interchangeable. While some of our contemporaries may find this fact distasteful, I hope it is clear from what has been said that the distortions and abuses so often associated in our time with hierarchy need not be feared by persons otherwise attracted to these teachings—that there is, in any case, no necessary connection between the doctrine and its historical perversions. For in fact what one glimpses in the perennial is vision is “a continual interchange of complementary ministrations”, to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis³⁶—not domination or usurpation of one gender by

the other, but a kaleidoscopically shifting though extremely lawful series of transforming actions, where momentary position must always mean instant displacement. It is therefore perhaps only this vision that has the capacity, not only to prevent the abuse of power by despotic hierarchies, but to rescue the people of our time from a purely quantitative egalitarianism, itself only one of the leveling effects of modern thought, which in the name of human “rights” would often seem to rob us of our true humanity by obscuring the differences and special qualities that reflect our participation in the Source.

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Professor Huston Smith, who read and commented upon an earlier draft of the present chapter.

² Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Middlesex, England: Perennial Books, 1981), 44.

³ *Esoterism*, 51.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 200.

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Male and Female in the Islamic Perspective,” in his *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London KPI, 1987) 47-58.

⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Amity, New York: Amity House 1986), 406.

⁷ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), 11.

⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human: Survey of Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1981), 87.

⁹ *Esoterism*, 50n.

¹⁰ *Esoterism*, 49-50.

¹¹ *Divine to the Human*, 87.

¹² Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Middlesex, England: Perennial Books, 1961), 11.

¹³ *Divine to the Human*, 87.

¹⁴ *Hinduism and Buddhism*, 13.

¹⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1984), 89.

¹⁶ *Hinduism and Buddhism*, 3.

¹⁷ René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (London; Luzac, 1953), 125.

¹⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1984), 19-20. It is clearly impossible to do more than summarize the perennialist evaluation of modernism, specifically modern “ontology”, in the context of this chapter. I must simply record the results of this assessment in very general terms, leaving it to the skeptical, but interested, reader to examine elsewhere the particular arguments and observations that have led to these conclusions. I would especially recommend Guénon’s *Reign of Quantity* and the chapter entitled “In the Wake of the Fall” in Schuon’s *Light on the Ancient Worlds*.

¹⁹ *Stations of Wisdom*, 87.

²⁰ *Esoterism*, 143.

²¹ *Stations of Wisdom*, 86.

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971), 349.

²³ *Essential Writings*, 404.

²⁴ Frithjof Schuon, “Dimensions of Omnipotence,” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, Nos. 1-2, p.11.

²⁵ *Divine to the Human*, 95.

²⁶ *Stations of Wisdom*, 24n.

²⁷ Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Coomaraswamy*, ed. Roger Lipsey, Vol. 2: *Selected Papers: Metaphysical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 231.

²⁸ The phrase “rather more like” is essential. However accurate the application of the concept of gender to certain demensions of the Divine Reality, this application, especially with regard to the second of the feminine’s elevating roles, must remain, like all positive descriptions of the Principle, strictly *ad extra* and *pro nobis*. For the ultimate Source is in itself beyond distinction.

²⁹ *Divine to the Human*, 94-95.

³⁰ *Logic and Transcendence*, 119n.

³¹ One may note that this primacy or priority of the Divine Feminine over the Divine Masculine is very clearly reflected, to choose but one example, in the esoteric implications of the Christian anti-Nestorian dogma that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the *Theotokos*, that is, the Mother not only of Christ as man, but of God Himself—that she is, in the words of Saint Peter Damian, “the origin of the beginning”. Of course for the Christian perennialist, the Virgin is the object of veneration not only here but at all the levels of the feminine, and it is upon her that his contemplation rests as he participates in its various interiorizing and elevating operations.

³² *Stations of Wisdom*, 151.

³³ *Stations of Wisdom*, 151.

³⁴ *Stations of Wisdom*, 151.

³⁵ *Essential Writings*, 406.

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), 36.