

In Memoriam - Titus Burckhardt

by

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The greatness of Titus Burckhardt has many aspects; and since one of these is the remarkable legacy of the writings that bear his name, I offer as my contribution to this memorial volume in his honor a review which I wrote of one of his major works when it was first published in 1967.¹ My choice of this particular tribute is influenced by the fact that Titus Burckhardt himself was pleased with it. The Royal Asiatic Society, for whose journal it was originally written, have kindly given permission for its re-print here:

Readers of this journal will scarcely need to be told that not all religious art can be called “sacred art” in the strict sense of the term; but even if one is aware of this as a fact, it is none the less worth reading Titus Burckhardt’s opening paragraphs on the immense difference between an art which is sacred both in form and subject, and an art which is sacred in its subject but profane in its form.

This relatively short book is far more than an introduction to its subject. It is so concentrated, and its examples are so carefully chosen, that again and again one has the impression that the author has “said the last word” on this or that particular aspect.

At the outset we are told that “attention will be confined to the art of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism, since the artistic rules appropriate to each are not only deducible from existing works, but are also confirmed by canonical writings and by the example of living masters”. The order in which the different traditions are taken is important for the economy of the book. The opening chapter on the Hindu temple not merely paves the way for the study of Christian architecture—for the temple like the cathedral, and unlike the mosque, is centred upon a sacrificial altar—but also serves to cast a general light upon the art of the ancient world. Particularly striking in this connexion are the references to the Red Indians. Although nomads have no temples they none the less have the “essence” of the temple, namely the altar; and there is a memorable quotation from a not long dead Sioux Indian who describes how a fire-altar is to be consecrated. As the author remarks, the great difference between the nomadic and sedentary “style” is to be seen at once in the roundness of the nomadic sanctuary, whereas the normal

1. Editor’s Note: Dr. Lings is here referring to Titus Burckhardt’s book *Sacred Art in East and West*.

shape of a temple is rectangular—a shape most expressive of sedentarism and therefore distasteful to nomads, for whom it suggests “the fixation of death”. “But apart from these differences of style, the conception of the sanctuary remains the same; whether it be built of solid materials...or whether it be no more than a *sacratum* established temporarily like the nomadic altar, it is always situated at the centre of the world.”

A study such as this is more or less bound to bring out both the homogeneity and the originality of the great religious civilizations, for each is in fact like a fruit which tastes the same all through and which no other fruit can replace, and the uniqueness and consistency of each is seen nowhere more clearly than in its sacred art. Not that the author is at any pains to stress these qualities. He has merely to be faithful to his subject; but it says much for the depth of his treatment that as the book unfolds the transition from the art of one civilization to another comes as something of a shock by way of contrast. The unsurpassable art of ancient Egypt, which is not given special consideration but which is often referred to, stands in the background as yet another superb example of uniqueness.

This extreme differentiation is none the less invaded, as it were, by unity from more than one angle. Above everything there is the transcendent unity which presides over all religion and therefore over all sacred art. Yet from a single point of union two arts may immediately diverge in opposite directions. For example, the chapter entitled “I am the Door”, which is a study of the Romanesque church portal, begins with the words: “A sanctuary is like a door opening onto the beyond, onto the Kingdom of God. That being so, the door of the sanctuary must itself recapitulate the nature of the sanctuary as a whole, and its symbolical relationships must be the same”. A note then reminds us: “Sometimes the architectural form of a sanctuary is reduced to that of the doorway alone; this is the case with the Japanese *torii*, which marks a sacred place”.

Apart from transcendent unity, there is also a certain unity in the craft traditions with their “rich archaic heritage that was common to all the peoples of Asia as well as to those of the Near East and of northern Europe”, traditions which have become independent of any particular religion and which, though always capable of being integrated into a particular religion, none the less retain something of their universality. The following passage is significant in more ways than one: “The craft symbolism was a factor of equilibrium in the psychic and spiritual economy of the Christian ‘city’; it compensated so to speak the unilateral pressure of Christian morality, fundamentally ascetic as it is, by manifesting divine truths in a light that is relatively non-moral and in any case non-volitive; it sets up against the sermon, which insists on what must be done by one who would become holy, a vision of the cosmos which is holy through its beauty; it makes men participate naturally and almost involuntarily in the world of holiness”.

It is fitting that this book should have been published almost simultaneously with the author’s remarkable book on alchemy (*Alchemy*, Stuart and Watkins, 1967). In one sense they are complements, though in another sense the two subjects inevitably overlap. For example, with reference to the crafts which transform materials, such as metallurgy, enameling, and staining glass, he remarks: “These techniques are all interconnected through a common craft inheritance

which goes back in part as far as ancient Egypt, with alchemy as its spiritual complement; the crude material is the image of the soul which must be transformed by the Spirit". In a similar connection he says: "According to Durandus de Mende, the stone 'trimmed to a rectangle and polished' represents the soul of a holy and steadfast man who will be built into the wall of the spiritual temple by the hand of the Divine Architect". Mention is made also of the devotional accompaniment to the manual work—the prayer and fasting of the icon painter, the Islamic *dhikr*, the Hindu *japa-yoga*; and there are some judicious remarks about a too often forgotten subject, namely, the "art of dress", which is an aspect of sacred art in that it springs from the same principles and is designed to have the same "alchemical" effect upon the soul.

No review of this book would be complete without reference to the last chapter, which explains with fascinating subtlety and without any simplification, doing justice to all the paradoxes and all the ironies inherent in the subject, exactly what has happened to Western European art since the end of the Middle Ages when it abandoned its sacred principles. The climax is when "the wheel has come full circle" or, more precisely, when the downward spiral of decadence came level with its starting-point in the second half of the 19th century. "There was then a sudden and fleeting opening up of fundamental possibilities.... At this moment a return to an art more honest, if not actually traditional, seemed possible; in order to understand this, it is enough to recall some of Gauguin's pictures, or the reflections of Rodin on Gothic cathedrals and Hindu sculpture. But art had neither a heaven nor an earth; it lacked not only a metaphysical background but also a craft foundation, with the result that artistic development passed fleetingly over certain half-open possibilities and fell back into the domain of pure individual subjectivity...in certain cases towards the chaotic regions of the subconscious...*flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo!*"²

The plates in themselves are admirable, but more trouble might have been taken as regards their distribution. For example, when one has been deeply plunged into the "mood" of Islamic art, it is disconcerting to come suddenly face to face, in the middle of the chapter, with a Tibetan *t'hanka*, however fine it may be! It is also difficult to see why, in an English publication, there are so many references to French editions of works which are available in English. For example, the author's *Introduction of Sufi Doctrine*, which has already gone to three editions, is probably better known in English than it is in the German and French editions. But these are small points, vastly outweighed by other considerations. It is indeed seldom that one has the privilege of reading a work by an author who has such mastery of his subject as is shown in *Sacred Art in East and West*.

2. Editor's Note: This quotation is from Virgil, and can be translated as "If I cannot bend the Powers above, I will stir up the infernal regions below!"

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Ignorant and foolish men, with a labor as vain as it is obstinate, search out the natures of things while they remain in ignorance of the One who is the Author and Maker of themselves and of all things alike. Yet they do not enquire after Him—as though without God truth might be found or happiness possessed. And, that you may be able to appreciate more clearly still how barren and indeed how pernicious such studies are, you must know that not only do they not enlighten the mind to know the truth, but they actually blind it, so that it cannot recognize the very truth...

What, then, does it profit a man to probe carefully into the nature of everything and understand it thoroughly, if he neither remembers nor knows whence he himself comes, nor whither he is going when this life is ended? For what is this mortal life but a journey? For we are passing through, and we see the things that are in this world as it were by the wayside. Does it follow, then, that we should stop and enquire into anything we see as we pass that is unusual or unfamiliar to us, and turn aside from our path for it? This is exactly what the people you are looking at are doing. Like foolish travelers, they have forgotten where they are going and have as it were sat down by the road to investigate the unfamiliar things they see. By habitually giving way to this folly they have already become such strangers to themselves that they do not remember that they are on a journey, nor do they seek their homeland...No life could be more disgraceful and no end more unhappy than to have no hope of salvation when one dies, because one has been unwilling to take the path of virtue while one lived.”

Hugh of Saint-Victor.