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***FORGOTTEN TRUTH: THE PRIMORDIAL TRADITION****.* By Huston Smith. New York, Harper & Row, 976. $8.95; Colophon paperback, Pp. 182. 1977, $2.95.

*Forgotten Truth* is primarily a presentation of the traditional esoteric view that reality consists of a hierarchy of Being. Within the hierarchy there are an indefinite number of worlds, but they can be classified into four levels:the terrestrial, psychic, and celestial planes, and the Infinite. The corresponding levels within the human microcosm are body, mind, soul, and spirit. “From the multiple heavens of Judaism to the storied structure of the Hindu temple and the angelologies of innumerable traditions, the view was reached convergently and independently, as if by innate tropism, by virtually all known societies…” (18). The important exception is our current society, whose fundamental flaw is its inclination to reduce all reality to the terrestrial plane alone. Modernity is “captive of an outlook presumed to be scientific but in fact scientistic” (17); it goes beyond the actual findings of science to deny that other approaches to knowledge are valid and other truths true” (16).

The mistake of reductionism – spirit reduced to metamorphosed matter (Darwinism), truth reduced to ideology (Marxism), psyche reduced to sex (Freud: there is no way “to sweeten the sour apple”) – lies in its attempt to explain the greater in terms of the less, with the not surprising consequence that the greater is thereby lessened. It is this, at root, that sets us against the modern outlook and turns us back toward tradition where the drift is always the reverse: to explain the lesser by means of the more, mode of explanation that tends to augment rather than deplete, for in both cases explanation produces a kind of rub-off [41-42].

The preceding quotation illustrates well the flavor of the book. The writing is careful, but not by virtue of analysis and argumentation. Rather the author focuses on portraying the essential attitudes and tendencies underlying the ideas he presents. To say of Freud’s work only “psyche reduced to sex” is not to carelessly oversimplify his theory; it serves rather to point to a characterizing tendency within Freudian metaphysics that were exemplifies the general reductionistic tendency being criticized. To criticize reductionism on the basis of the consequence of its acceptance (the lessening of the greater) is not to fail to see the relevance of rational considerations regarding its truth, but it is to take seriously the nonrational factors (the desire to augment or to deplete) that determine our adoption of a metaphysical framework. Indeed, this traditional metaphysics is so foreign and implausible to most of us that, before we can begin to work with arguments concerning its truth or analyses that explain its meaning, we need first to develop a feel for the material to enable us just to hear undistorted the point of view being expressed. Because *Forgotten Truth* provides such an entry into unknown territory, it should make an excellent classroom text or a one-book-to-read on the subject.

The task of the text appears to be to isolate sympathetically the metaphysics of the traditional perspective from the various cultic contexts in which this one metaphysics naturally abides. However, tradition insists that this sort of isolation cannot be achieved. The paradox is resolved by the author’s style which in a sense exemplifies the metaphysics being presented. It both produces with the book at least an echo of the cultic contexts and points beyond the text by taking seriously its limitations with respect to presenting these ideas. According to the traditional viewpoint, some things can be said and some things cannot be said; and some ideas must be expressed one way at one time and another way at another time. So the author who takes the traditional view seriously must know when to grapple with the idea by questioning, clarifying, and arguing – and when to pursue it less directly by using vagueness, paradox, or silence. To my ear, Huston Smith appropriately mixes and balances these two approaches, moving gracefully between prose and poetry, hesitation and affirmation, analysis and synthesis. This is certain to turn away anyone whose methodology seeks to secure truth in a final form that is available to all, but to approach esoteric metaphysics in this way would be to change the subject before the discussion began.

Certainly many reads will find it difficult to agree with Huston Smith either that there is a single primordial tradition common to “virtually all known societies” or that this tradition represents the truth, but the strength of the author’s scholarship and vision, as well as his ability to communicate it clearly, justify a careful reading of this book. For those who are already familiar with mystical literature, *Forgotten Truth* is helpful as an organizing overview, but its brevity necessarily leaves many questions unanswered. Still there are details that may enlighten even the serious student of this field. For example there is the specific emphasis given to knowledge in the mystic vision:

[Joy] is the logical consequence of the cause that preceded it: the discovery of being’s unity. The point is crucial, for without it the mystic vision is demoted to mystical experience. The vision is, of course, an experience in the vacuous sense that everything that comes man’s way can be included in this loosest of all words. But by the same token, to call it a n experience is to say nothing unless the point of the word it to stress its feeling tone. And this is precisely what must not be done on pain of debasing the currency. Feeling is a sentiment. To approach the mystic primarily on his feeling side is sentimental in the strict, pejorative sense toward which stress on the feeling aspect of things inevitable slopes. The mystic vision is not a feeling: it is a seeing, a knowing. We could add that it is a knowing that involves being – the man of God, says Eckhart, “is never rejoiced; he is joy itself” – but it is enough if we stop here with the fact that it is a knowing. It is *noetic*. In the words of William James, its disclosures afford “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.” [111-112]

In the final chapter, the author presents a thesis that will separate him even from many who are attracted to the extraordinary metaphysics he has been portraying. Here he applies this metaphysics in questioning the reality of historical progress, and he concludes that it is an illusion. Hope is real only when it is transhistorical, relying on “an ascent of the individual soul through a medium – the world – which does not itself change substantially but provides stable rungs on which the soul can climb” (118). Having learned that with modernity “in a single stroke the mansion of being was reduced to its ground floor,” we now read that

The consequence for hope was obvious: if being has no upper stories, hope has no vertical prospect. If it is to go anywhere – and hope by definition implies a going of some sort – henceforth that “where” could only be forward or horizontal. The extent to which the modern doctrine of progress is the child, not of evidence as it would like to believe, but of hope’s elan – the fact that being indispensable it *does* spring eternal in the human breast and, in the modern world view, has no direction to flow save foreward – is among the undernoted facts of intellectual history. If the ratio between evidence and hope in the idea of historical progress were to be laid squarely before us, we would be humbled in our estimate of ourselves as rational creatures. [120]

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