

The Perennial Psychology and the Search for a Common Lexicon

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

We have wished to emphasize that the doctrine of the *Philosophia Perennis*, in which our psychology is included, is stated in different areas and at different times not only in cognate words, but often in the same idioms and in terms of the same symbolism.... We have sometimes dwelt on etymologies with a view to showing that the doctrines referred to are implicit in the very structure of the sacred languages in which they are stated.¹

(Ananda K. Coomaraswamy)

A central challenge in discussing or writing about sacred psychology is “what to call it?” A significant part of this dilemma is that philosophy, psychology and religion prior to the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries were interconnected and anchored in the Sacred, in contradistinction with how they are viewed in the modern world as autonomous and eclipsed of their sacred function. Modern psychology and psychiatry for that matter, seek to treat the human psyche in a way that is devoid of its original meaning—“science of the soul”—which recognized the ultimate source of the human psyche’s health and well-being by what transcended it. What is ‘above’ the human psyche brings it balance and peace, and for this reason the human psyche is subordinate to what

¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology,” in *Coomaraswamy; Vol. 2, Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 378.

transcends it. The integral psychology of the perennial philosophy originates *in divinis* and expresses itself through the sacred and unanimous science of the psyche.

Several key authors within the traditionalist or perennialist school have made significant headway in outlining such an integral psychology based upon the perennial philosophy. Perennialist philosopher and art historian, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), referred to this sacred psychology in his landmark posthumous essay “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology” as “traditional psychology”, “perennial psychology” and “pneumatology”.² Similarly, Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), art historian and philosopher of religion, referred to this sacred psychology as “traditional psychology”.³ Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) and Laleh Bakhtiar (b. 1938) have also used the term “traditional psychology” in their writings.⁴

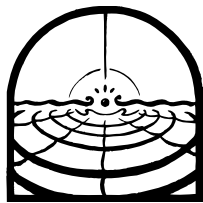
While these designations are very clear and suitable for those informed about what ‘Tradition’ or the perennial philosophy signifies in this context, such is not the case with audiences outside this

² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology,” in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 2, Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 333-378.

³ Titus Burckhardt, “Traditional Cosmology and Modern Science: Modern Psychology,” in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, trans. and ed. William Stoddart (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 45-67; Titus Burckhardt, “Traditional and Modern Science: Modern Psychology,” in *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations*, ed. William Stoddart (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), p. 46.

⁴ Whitall N. Perry, “The Zodiac of the Soul: Observation on the Differences between Traditional and Empirical Psychology,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), pp. 200-228; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Sufism and the Integration of Man,” in *Sufi Essays* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1972), pp. 43-56; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Science of the Cure of Souls,” in *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 118-124; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Integration of the Soul,” in *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William C. Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), pp. 73-84; Laleh Bakhtiar, *Traditional Psychoethics and Personality Paradigm* (Chicago, IL: Institute of Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance, 1993); Laleh Bakhtiar, *Moral Healer’s Handbook: Psychology of Spiritual Chivalry* (Chicago, IL: Institute of Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance, 1994); Laleh Bakhtiar, *Moral Healing Through the Most Beautiful Names: The Practice of Spiritual Chivalry* (Chicago, IL: Institute of Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance, 1994).

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