INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BOLTON: THE SELF AND THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

With Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

SBS: Perhaps we could begin with how you first learned about the *philosophia perennis* and the "traditionalist" or "perennialist" school of comparative religion and its authors (i.e. Rene Guenon, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon), including how this played a seminal role in shaping the intellectual vision that underscores all your work?

RB: I first got a glimpse of this at the age of eighteen, from reading Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, but the real beginning was two years later, when I found a copy of Guenon's *The Reign of Quantity* in a public library. This book was to me clearly in a class of its own, and it held my attention so much that I quite forgot to go to bed that night, a very rare occurrence for me. A great many things for a long time half-suspected and half-uttered all came together in my mind at once.

At that time, I was already well acquainted with philosophy, including Platonism, but even then I saw the best-known modern philosophers as either trivial or perverse. During the following years, my spare time was increasingly occupied with books by Guenon and Schuon, though not so as to wholly replace philosophy. This order of events is important, because the things I wrote at that time show that for me the traditional wisdom did not mean parting ways with conceptual thinking. At that time such an option was not even conceivable as far as I was concerned. That was to have consequences for my attitude

to Nondualism later on, once I realized what it meant. The idea that higher levels of reality must mean higher degrees of simplicity, as though simplicity and complexity were ultimately separable, struck me as clearly untrue.

So it appeared that the reality of the esoteric must mean the existence of an esoteric philosophy, and not the rejection of philosophy professed by Guenon. For those of us who tend to see things in black and white, the only other traditionalist option looks like a fundamentalism for intellectuals, which soon enough turns the esoteric into a hyped-up exoteric. The rejection of philosophy means the rejection of an activity of the spirit which is necessary for making the truth one’s own, and its usual outcome is just bad philosophy, rather than something of a higher nature.

I am lastingly indebted to the famous modern traditionalists for all the traditional wisdom they have brought together in their writings, and for their resounding vindication of the reality of metaphysical knowledge in the teeth of a culture designed to suppress it, and that remains true despite the fact that I do not accept their dogma that all traditional wisdom consists of so many expressions of monism. Although Guenon professed a rejection of all systems, he nevertheless attempted by means of monism to force all traditions into a single system, or Procrustean bed, regardless of probability and scholarship. Those who think otherwise must ask whether they can believe that all ancient wisdom is the fruit of a system of monism which did not exist

before the mid-Eighth Century A.D., when Shankara originated it in India. Why should traditionalists, of all people, take so seriously a conception from so relatively late in history, and one so localized?

Traditionalism deserves to be a major spiritual force in the modern world, but I fear it is not, and that that is mainly because of this way in which it has identified itself with just one kind of metaphysics. The best thing for it would be a return to the more realistic and open approach to tradition exemplified in Fabre D'Olivet's *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, and I hope that my writings will encourage others to think on the same lines.

SBS: A central element in your work is focused on personal identity which you have explored at length in both your books *Person, Soul and Identity* (1994) and *Self and Spirit* (2005). With this said, what are the essential differences between the Self articulated in the spiritual traditions of the perennial philosophy and that of modern psychology? And is the Self of the latter two "forces" of modern psychology (humanistic and transpersonal) the same as the Self that the traditions address?

RB: For me, the Self of spiritual tradition is very largely identified with what it is for the Neoplatonists and Saint Augustine. It therefore differs form modern psychology by virtue of an "immanent transcendence" in the person, about which other faculties and properties are arranged in various degrees of subordination. This is

not considered scientific because it assumes a supernatural reality in us, but I do not see why it should be any less rational to include the supernatural *a priori* than to exclude it in the same manner. I therefore do not accept views of the Self which are taken to be scientific on account of being solely a combination of phenomena, which would exclude any basis for its capacity for salvation.

The traditional idea of the Self as I understand it is a spiritual soul which is active between the opposite poles of its intellectual faculty and the body and sensation. We are thus beings who comprise many levels of being or reality, and who have the capacity for creating voluntary identifications from among these levels of being. That is the basis for the idea of self-creation. The issue involved in this concerns the possibilities which become predominant in us. In his book *The Greatness of the Soul*, Ch.35, St.Augustine distinguishes seven different levels of the soul, and even at the highest level it continues to be a soul. On that point he is in agreement with the great Neoplatonists.

Modern psychology has departed from this position because it is expected to follow scientific standards which are better suited to external things. Thus there is a great elaboration of mental states and functions without much regard for what exactly they inhere in. That can end by making moral responsibility unintelligible, whereas I adhere to the common sense idea of self-as-agent, which I have argued for in my writings, as in *Person, Soul, and Identity* Ch.1. Another reason why I

have reservations about the value of modern psychology is owing to the fact that modern minds suffer from a kind of extraversion which can apparently grasp anything but the essential. This is an effect of the modern political order, with its determination to create more and more equality of opportunity. Every time that sort of equality is extended, there is a corresponding increase in the amount of competition for all kinds of employment. That results in innumerable minds whose powers are largely adapted to the demands of jungle warfare, and that is no basis for understanding the Self.

SBS: You make a distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic person. This understanding differs from modern psychology's (behaviourism, psychoanalysis, and some schools within humanistic psychology) criteria of personal identity that is rooted in the identification with the empirical ego often seeking to establish a "healthy ego" or "ego strength" rather than transcendence. Could you please elaborate on this and also is the existence of ego necessary?

RB: To deal with the last point first, the ego is necessary as a consequence of our being individual persons, as we must be according to the *imago dei.* The ego is also inseparable from our being embodied beings, not accidentally, but according to our essence. The human state is unique in combining all levels of being in a single nature, which is what we mean by the microcosm. All conscious beings below our own level belong to the

animal kingdom, while all those above us are pure spirits, while our state combines the properties of both animal and spirit, and is at the centre of the Great Chain of Being.

Because of this, man could be in some respects something more than God, and this issue is answered by the Christian doctrine that God became man. This is why the ego is not to be done away with or escaped, but ultimately redeemed, just as Christ's risen humanity is with God in eternity. Thus the ego enters by grace into transcendence in accordance with its nature and not in defiance of it, or by the elimination of it.

Such is the orthodox position which sets the direction of my thought about the person. Those who think the ego should be eliminated are attempting to undo the Great Chain of Being, and are equating the ego with its fallen state out of contact with any effective means of salvation. I would add that all this is inseparable from a conception of our central place in the universe which is unaffected by Copernican and Darwinian views of it.

My conception of the authentic person is closely connected with the above ideas, because it depends on a hierarchy of faculties within the individual person which reflects the whole of which he is a part. This has been expressed by Fabre D'Olivet in a vitalized and dynamic development of Plato's tripartite conception of the soul which I have discussed in *Self and Spirit.* According to this conception, the development of a person from birth proceeds from instincts alone into instincts and

sentiments or emotions, and from thence into reason and intellect as well. The development of each of these “spheres” triggers that of the next higher one when it has reached a certain extent.

This pattern of development is universal, and does not amount by itself to an authentic person, because the levels of personal being have to be in the right relation to one another, as well as being individually developed. Instinct alone is enough to produce action, but sentiment can also do so, and with no necessary dependence on instinct. This is important because the contents of the mental or intellectual sphere have no power of their own to initiate action, but can only do so by arousing sentiments in harmony with them, and for that one needs intelligent emotions. Without them, all one’s thoughts and ideas will have no power over one’s behaviour, which will then be dictated only by the impact of external impressions on one’s sentiments and instincts.

Conversely, in authentic persons, their ideas, ideals and values always arouse the related feelings, while these control behaviour and action, and so they are governed primarily from within and not by externals. In this way the person is effectively a unity, either for good or ill. This is because authenticity by itself does not make anyone either a saint or a genius, even though one cannot become a saint or a genius without it. It can only be a force for good when the person’s ideas and ideals include the most universal ones, such as are taught by the religions. To fail in that condition is to drift into the

demonic. One of the worst things about the modern world is its proliferation of unspiritual authentic persons who have transcended mediocrity and assume that they have a right to the role of prophets and leaders.

Spiritual authenticity will naturally appear as “ego strength,” but it is not of the kind which ignores self-transcendence. The unspiritual ego can also be strong on a level with does not include any effective input from the intellectual level, but that is the opposite of what I am describing here. The legitimate ego is the one in effective contact with all the soul’s levels of being, and the strength it has is not a result of making strength its primary objective.

SBS: You make an interesting case that traces the “Cogito argument” to St.Augustine rather than Descartes. Contrary to attempting to prove the existence of the individual as the final aim of human endeavour, St.Augustine was emphasizing the *a priori* reality of metaphysical certitude. Could you please expand on this?

RB: Besides being a source of metaphysical certitude, the Cogito argument is a vital element in the discovery of personality which is specially Christian. Many thinkers have thought beyond Plato in relative matters, but St.Augustine is one of the very few who have thought beyond him on something of fundamental importance, such as personality. It is therefore of equal importance for both philosophy and spirituality, and so exemplifies the

spiritual role of philosophy for those who wish to see it. This certainty based on self-reflection is what would be expected of a being who belongs to the order of spirits, because it effects something outside the possibilities of natural causality. In the latter case, one thing acts on another through a coincidence of any number of corresponding parts, but in the self-reflective act the whole being acts on itself without mediation. Proclus discusses this property of spiritual being at length in the *Elements of Theology*, where he says the soul is “converted to itself” or “reverts upon itself.” What he says about this “reversion” is very relevant to the Cogito conception, and should get more attention.

Sources for the idea are to be found in Augustine’s *The Trinity*, Book X, Ch.10, and Book XV Ch.12. In Book X, 10, one finds the crucial idea that “every mind knows and is certain concerning itself.” From this it follows that there can be no conclusions more certain than the ones which follow from the mind’s knowledge of its own operations. Nearly all cases of error occur where one has tried to explain external matters by reasoning on inadequate evidence. There is no such problem in the mind’s relation to itself, whence the Cogito argument is valid in both Augustinian and Cartesian forms.

Its opponents have had to affect to deny the very existence of the mind in order to get rid of this source of certainty, and such thinkers are best answered with a counter-challenge that there is no such thing as sense

perception either. They must either accept that or prove its existence by means which make no use of it.

Augustine's version of the Cogito makes full use of life as well as knowledge and existence: "And no one doubts that no one understands who does not live, and that no one lives who is not." (Bk.X, Ch10). Likewise the ability to will depends on both existing and on being alive. Doubt is not relevant here, for one must be alive in order to doubt as well as to either know or be deceived; doubt and deception themselves imply life and existence and the knowledge of them. If we know that we live, we must know that we know that we live, so that we thus know two things instead of one, and that makes a third thing. Self-reflective thought can thus generate any number of true conclusions from its own operations, as in Bk.XV, Ch.12.

Between the times of St.Augustine and Descartes, the faculty manifest in the Cogito argument was recognized in India by Madhva and the Dvaita Vedanta tradition, where it was used as an argument against Shankara's monism. (I have written about this in *The One and the Many*). The self-reflective power involved in this is not the kind of thing which is open to monistic or pantheistic sublation, rather as the self-generative nature of God is not open to sublation in relation to the universe.

There are some who see a problem in the affirmation of the "I" who thinks and exists, because they think that experience allows only "there is thinking" and "there is

existence.” But the Cogito argument, like any other, goes through different steps, and its status as an argument requires that the ego which draws the conclusion should know itself to be identical with the ego which stated the premise. Without this continuous conscious identity there is no argument of any kind, and this identity is the “I.” This is one of the reasons why I have argued elsewhere that thought only takes place subject to the mental agency exerted by the “I,” even though this may be taken for an uncritical acceptance of common sense. In fact it can stand up to criticism.

For Descartes, the Cogito argument was an answer to a particular kind of sceptical attack on knowledge, one which denied that there were any valid arguments on the grounds that argument is always incomplete. The essence of argument is a two-step process, namely, the affirmation of a proposition and a rational connection between it and another proposition which is either known to be true or is widely accepted. Normally, the thing argued for and its supportive criterion are quite separate, so that there is always the possibility of having to argue in turn for the truth of the criterion. However, for Descartes, the “I am” and the “I think” which supported it were so closely related as to be inseparable. On that basis, he had an argument which was not open to the objection that the criterion needed separate proof, and this agrees with Augustine’s conception of the deep union between being, knowing, and living.

Today, it is widely believed that the Cogito argument is invalid, all too often by people who neither know nor

care why it was accepted as true in the first place. This attitude, with its lack of interest in the philosophy involved, results from a politically-inspired movement in favour of relativism and spiritual horizontalism, among other things. People who know that they know something are not welcome in a culture where people are expected to conform to norms which are socially imposed. That situation reveals a shift of power from the individual to the collective which is all the more remarkable in that it has arisen without needing to be imposed by decrees from dictators.

SBS: In your book *Person, Soul and Identity* (1994) you write about “Existentialism and the Self” which explicitly states that existentialism is not compatible with an integral psychology addressing the whole person, nor with the perennial philosophy. You write: “Existentialism has been carried along with a general historical movement toward the disintegration of the individual.” (p.xiv) and elsewhere: “Existential philosophies share a negative attitude to metaphysics, that is, to the idea that man can make non-empirical reality intelligible to himself.” (p.xiv) Many practitioners and theorists within both humanistic and transpersonal psychology would argue the contrary, especially those within humanistic as it is sometimes termed “existential-humanistic” psychology. What are the fundamental incompatibilities between existentialism and

the *philosophia perennis*, given that the existential facets of human existence are valid and real, yet the perennial philosophy does not reduce the human individual to the psycho-physical order?

RB: I hope my observations do not sound prejudiced, although I was not thinking about an “existential-humanistic” psychology, but was simply thinking of existentialism as part of an anti-intellectual tendency, where a phenomenal reality, existence in this case, is substituted for the intellect. Existence, life and intellect are fundamental realities, but existence and life as such are objects in relation to intellect, and not vice-versa. In making negative remarks about existentialism, I was thinking primarily about its historical development from Kierkegaard, who defended the reality of the individual person against the monistic metaphysics of the Hegelians.

With the passage of time, it seems to me, the emphasis shifted from the individual person to the quantum of existence which the individual possesses, possibly so as to detach it from its Christian origin and get at something supposedly more universal. This could easily lend itself to reductionism, and that in turn would leave one open to a return to the Hegelian position. The belief that reductionism will lead us to the hidden essence of things is widely held, in theology as well as in philosophy, but it is liable to involve question-begging judgements as to what is inessential.

The possibility of some such betrayal can be seen in the fact that Sartre was also a Marxist, although the

individual person as such was no more a reality for Marx than for Hegel. Where the question of giving existence precedence over intelligence is concerned, Hegel himself led the way in going down this path. According to Popper, much of Hegel's thought was intended to destroy the distinction between facts and values, or between Forms and instantiations as Platonists would put it. Such thinking serves to justify the belief that the end justifies the means, and that political and military success are a guarantee of truth and value. The truth would then be whatever happened to win.

Such thinking would rule out the necessary duality between cognition and its environmental conditions of existence, and that is why those who want to reduce truth to an ideology are so hostile to dualism. The relation of this to tradition can be seen from the fact that the independence of reason has always been part of traditional thought, because tradition by definition is an expression of the full range of human potentialities. However, it may be that existentialism has moved on in recent times, in ways which are truer to its original inspiration, but even so, there is much in modern forms of it which is too well adapted to the anti-personalism which I was arguing against in *Person, Soul, and Identity.* Traditional thought gives first place to the intellect, and not to any of its conditions, however important.

SBS: The perennial philosophy acknowledges the doctrine of the "multiple states of being" that perceives

gradations of consciousness that exist within the human individual; which directly correlate with the traditional understanding of the Self. How would you explain the distinctions between the "multiple states of consciousness" as articulated by the *philosophia perennis* in contrast with "altered states of consciousness" found in both humanistic and transpersonal psychology?

RB: With regard to the multiple states of being, my ideas are shaped by Plotinus' idea of man as a microcosm with a centre of volition and consciousness which can relate to all levels of being from within. Because of its total range of possibilities, the soul is able to form its own unique representation of the world, having something in its own makeup corresponding to all it can experience. This is what could be called paradoxically the "immanent transcendent" in us, which shows the human soul to be of the spiritual order, unlike the souls of animals; spirit relates to the totality of things.

The broadest divisions among these states or levels of being are the gross-material, the subtle or psychical, and the noetic; their boundary is a state of pure unity. The gross level is essentially multiple, with patterns of unity imposed on it by the archetypal Forms. The psychical level is also multiple, but not spatially divided as such, only temporally. The noetic level is primarily a unity with internal diversity, as intellectual experience discerns diverse things within an overall unity.

These broad divisions I think should be related to the seven levels of the soul described by Saint Augustine in his dialogue *The Greatness of the Soul*, Chs.33-35. Here, the first level is that of the formative agent of the body's unity and of its absorption of nourishment, similarly to vegetative growth. At the seventh level, all things are known in their highest essences and the mysteries of religion are directly experienced.

For Augustine, the progression through these levels of being was conditioned by asceticism and religious practice. His negative attitude to the sex instinct had a positive side inasmuch as he saw such asceticism not so much as denial as a means whereby the natural was to be spiritualized. The earlier states were not taken to be bad as such, but rather as stages towards a higher unity which comprehended them without divisions. Similarly with Plato, he thought that our moral state affects the kinds of reality that our minds are best able to grasp. He was only interested in altered states of consciousness insofar as they could be included in a hierarchy of being with God at its head.

SBS: Could you please describe how your own spiritual affiliation with the Christian tradition informs your understanding of human identity in the light of *imago Dei* or "the image of God" illustrating the sacredness of the human body?

RB: My Christian beliefs and the idea of man as a microcosm are closely related. This relatedness is the key to the uniqueness of mankind in the order of beings and that of the individual person within mankind, and involves a combination of religious orthodoxy with a traditional metaphysical view of the world with many levels of being. The animal creation is wholly immanent in the material universe, even though it is ensouled and combines three levels of being, namely, those of matter, life and consciousness. Human beings share those levels, along with reason and self-awareness as well.

This self-aware intelligence places man in the order of spirits, even though he exists on a material level. Thus man uniquely combines in himself the material and spiritual orders of creation, which compensates for his being the lowest member of the spiritual order. None of the higher orders of spiritual beings has this union with the material creation, and neither has God as such, since He too is pure spirit. The Divine Logos became incarnate and lived as a man so that the human microcosm could be taken up into the Second Person of the Trinity and live for ever as the eternal archetype of the human state. Without this, man’s duality of natures and his capacity for self-sacrifice would have been something for which God would have had no equivalent.

The human face and body are therefore in a sense sacred because they manifest on the material level both

the central state among the hierarchy of beings and the Divine archetype at the same time. The uniqueness of the individual person follows from this because a supposed race of standard or cloned human beings would manifest only quantity, and not the uniqueness of their Creator and archetype. Just as the whole can be manifest in the part, the whole of things, spiritual and material, is manifest in the person.

I think it is not an accident, therefore, that the meaning and reality of personality should be a Christian discovery, even though the importance of the individual had already been discovered in pre-Christian times in Greek philosophy and in the moral teachings of the Jewish prophetic tradition. What makes an individual a person in the fullest sense is something which can only be seen in the light of the personal and Trinitarian idea of God. In regard to salvation, this is the kind of being who can reasonably be thought of as being designed for it.

This idea of a personal identity which is created and willed by God, and is the instantiation of a Form whether we are conscious of it or not, is a complete contrast to the view of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta whereby our identities would result solely from the activities of our mental faculties, those activities themselves resulting only from the habits of our own lives and of countless previous generations. That view of the self is really a nightmare, which few of those who profess it follow with full consistency.

However, these ideas still leave us with the problem that what we essentially are does not appear to be connected with the things we do, nor are the two to be confused, even though identity is often defined in terms of one's prevailing activities. The sinner is not the same thing as the sin, but there is still a great difficulty in explaining how two such different ideas of identity can combine and interact. I think the answer lies in the many different levels of being which we combine in ourselves, which give rise to endless possibilities which are very unequal in value.

SBS: How can the observance and practice of the traditional doctrines and methods of the *philosophia perennis* offset the present-day disintegration, which is ever-widening and ever-multifaceted and yet compounded within the core quandary, where all other crises are a derivative of the spiritual crisis of today?

RB: The present-day disintegration you speak of comes from a very widespread inversion of our true sense of identity, a huge mental and moral extraversion. There is pressure to identify with countless things in the outside world which may in any case be completely unrelated to one another, and to identify with practically everything except

the experiencing self on whom all these depend *qua* experience. Modern society breathes a sense of urgency and insecurity on everyone, until living one's life is felt to be a matter of dealing with one long emergency. To be mentally imprisoned in this way of thinking can rightly be called the "cosmic illusion," experienced by a self which cannot connect with its own essence and which may have lost even the will to do so.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the doctrine and practice of the *philosophia perennis*, in a form such as Platonism for example, is able to reach the deepest levels of our spiritual problem, but the way forward is much hindered by a paradox. It has been pointed out that even to choose to abide by reason in the direction of one's life is a choice which cannot come from reason itself, because in a pre-rational state, the choice of reason must come from an impulse which is not rational as such, even though reason may be implicit in it. (Those who think that we do not need religion because reason alone enough are blind to the fact that we cannot accept even the dictates of reason without grace).

Similarly with the deeper forms of wisdom: the initial problem is simply to realize that something is very wrong and that one's deepest need is for a way of knowing and loving which illuminates the self and its world at the same time. This disposition may not be effectual unless

it is strong and recurrent, and is never neglected, and is always fed with the appropriate nourishment when it is consciously present. This is not as bad as being unable to take a medicine until one has already taken it, but something of that paradox is there.

Somehow, there has to be a sense of danger and a spirit of resistance, which are made very difficult by modern education, which is so largely a programme of socialization. I say “socialization” in a generic sense of the word, but it is increasingly present in the political sense of the word as well, and in the Christian West, there are many who seem to be unaware of the difference between Christianity and socialism, let alone the fact that socialism was devised by philosophers for the purpose of eliminating Christianity.

The political side of modern life cannot be ignored in this context, simply because it is becoming ever more intrusive in supposedly free countries. It has a hold on education which could never look normal to those for whom politics and religion are fundamentally different. However, this sociological loss of the distinction between them is a direct manifestation of the process of entropic collapse which I wrote about in The Order of the Ages. It is inseparable from the reduction in the qualitative content of the world of our experience under present world conditions.

These remarks point to a different evaluation of individualism than is usually made today. Instead of seeing it as something negative as such, we should recognize that it can come in good and bad forms like anything else. Not only that, but despite its potential for evil, it is above all through the individual that the spirit is manifest, although there is a widespread reluctance to admit this fact. Instead, there is a sinister coincidence between the attitudes of so-called politically correct thinking in the secular culture and of some orientalizing kinds of spirituality in regard to the individual and individualism. Spiritual awakenings are least of all likely in those who have a habit of imitating other people who are imitating other people.

SBS: In your book *The Order of the Ages* (2008) which illustrates the *cosmologia perennis,* you have written the following words: "the sphere of consciousness always contracts with the passage of time" (p. 128). This statement is in fundamental contrast to evolutionary theory and the modern notion of "progress", which also conflicts with the theories of humanistic and transpersonal psychology—emphasizing "consciousness evolution" as proclaimed by Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin and more recently Ken Wilber. Could you speak to this?

RB: The idea that the sphere of consciousness contracts with the passage of time does sound like a complete paradox in today's world, where information about nearly all subjects is expanding at an enormous rate, but we need to distinguish firstly between the sphere of potential objects of consciousness, and the sphere of actual consciousness in most people today. The accumulation of knowledge gives no indication as to the extent of our mental grasp of it. In any case, intelligence in today's world is confined to the rational level, while its intellectual form is made marginal or eliminated. That alone, by absolute standards, means a contraction in the scope of intelligence.

One way of explaining this is by reference to the cyclic principles on which *The Order of the Ages* is based. A slow contraction in the average awareness is predicted on this basis because (a) each state of the world is the effect of the last one and the cause of the one after it, while the causal power is always rather less in the effect than in the cause, and (b) the range of instantiation of the Forms in the material world is by no means a fixed quantity of realities. With the passage of time, the number of Forms instantiated, their durations on the phenomenal level are all steadily diminished, so that the material world is made more material by default. This perspective is in accordance with the ancient wisdom traditions, which see the world moving away from a divinely-governed origin.

In the same book, I sought to justify the apparent paradox of generally contracting consciousness by reference to a property of time which is very difficult to understand adequately, but which would also explain why the higher faculties should become increasingly slow to develop. Successive measurable time-intervals do not necessarily contain the same amount of temporal duration, even though other temporal changes can be seen to be going on in a constant proportion to them. Take, for example, two persons both born in 1920 and who die at the age of eighty in 2000. Here, both common sense and philosophy of time agree that they have both had the same total duration or time on earth. However, if we now compare the lifetimes of two persons, one of whom lived from 1920 to 2000, and one who lived from 1820 to 1900, it does not follow logically that these two have both had the same amount of time, even though common sense says they have had.

This common sense conviction assumes an idea of time which was made into a dogma by Isaac Newton, for whom time was an independent reality which transcended everything which took place in it, and had a uniform and invariable motion of its own. There is no proof for that, nor is there likely to be, especially in the wake of the Theory of Relativity. There is no necessity for time to advance by increments which are all the same: they may progressively change in quantity.

Between eternity and time as we know it is *aevum* or endless time, and the flow of time in this world proceeds through states which are increasingly removed from the absolute duration of *aevum*. Human life can

thus be growing longer in relation to other temporal phenomena which are affected by the same temporal contraction. To measure a human lifespan in this way would be like measuring a contracting object with a ruler which is contracting at a slightly faster rate.

Now if it is the case that human life is growing shorter on an absolute scale, it will be the most slowly-developing faculty, that of intellect, which will be the most adversely affected by this. This idea of temporal contraction is an aspect of the cyclic changes already referred to, but it is a subject which does not directly depend on traditional conceptions of time and history, and some may prefer that kind of alternative.

SBS: In your work *Keys of Gnosis* (2004) you write an interesting observation: "The transcendent dimension of everyday consciousness is evidenced by unmistakable signs if one knows how to look for them." (p. 55) This is a direct testimony of the ever-present reality that is generally unnoticed in our highly complex and secular epoch that does not give priority to contemplation over action, perhaps you could elaborate on the meaning of this statement? Would you mind also speaking to the implications that this understanding has on the seemingly paradoxical recognition of being-in-the-world and yet being essentially "not of this world"?

RB: This is a subject which has seemed important to me for a long time. Spiritual vision can begin much lower down the scale of experiences than most people realize, a fact which I was first made aware of by C.S.Lewis' *Miracles*. Here he explains how the supernatural begins with reason. Reason and nature form a duality because no matter how close they may be, reason is never reducible to the natural. When thought and behaviour are governed by natural causes alone, one is moved by a self-generative linkage of feelings, sensations and images.

This kind of linkage requires nothing more than the function of association, and it acts like an object drifting on the sea. The presence of reason does not abolish this kind of process, but directs it for purposes which give it unity and meaning. Its effect on the merely natural comes from the fact, as I understand it, that reason is present in nature while not being part of it, but rather transcending it. This is the traditional idea of the divinity of reason which modern thought has turned against in the interests of a kind of unity and wholeness which is deeply unintelligent and unspiritual.

Something similar can be seen in theology, where the excuse for it is a supposed need to be rid of everything which seems to come from Greek sources, as if intelligence could do nothing but

conceal the truth. Nevertheless, reason is as it were the ground floor of vision, despite the fact that reason alone has no power to confer spirituality on purposes which are deluded, even though its operation is supernatural in itself.

On the next level above the purely rational, the objective reality of the higher values is always manifest, even in precisely the things which seem to exclude or refute them in the outside world. This is because one can only have adverse reactions to such things as injustice, fraud, ugliness, and so forth because justice, truth and beauty are realities eternally constitutive of our own minds and of the universe. Such is the basis for being able to see God in everything.

Direct manifestations of the Forms in clear instances and in their physical negations are thus equally revelations of the same truth in two different modes. Besides that, there is the Divine illumination of mind which, as I indicated at the end of *Keys of Gnosis*, can be found even in the normal workings of the mind. This is because all one’s efforts to understand things have no coercive power, however welcome that would be. In reality, effort is made in the direction of some object, and the understanding may discover the connections involved in it or

not, a fact which Plato explained on the basis that the Form of the Good, which transcends all the other Forms, is the unifying light which connects the Forms in one's understanding. This idea was also taken up by St.Augustine, whose idea of Divine illumination means that one's use of intelligence can amount to a conversation with God, well short of mystical experience.

Although the natural and the supernatural are profoundly different, they are not separate, but interpenetrate in the "naturally supernatural" as F.Schuon called it. Such things may be ignored by those whose attention is on the highest forms of vision, but too much emphasis on that level of experience may cause people to see God's world as just a desert or a rubbish dump, and seeing things in that light is no preparation for the deepest spirituality. These observations are also the kind of answer I would offer to questions concerning man's involvement with both transcendence and immanence, and concerning the question of being in the world without being part of it in a solely immanent manner.

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Books by Dr. Robert Bolton:

The One and the Many (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008)

The Order of the Ages: World History in the Light of a Universal Cosmogony (first edition, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001; second edition, San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008)

Keys of Gnosis (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004)

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