



Pallis' Errors

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Why, then do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye?

The Bible

In his *A Buddhist Spectrum*, Marco Pallis expresses his displeasure over René Guénon's views on Buddhism. For Pallis, Guénon's 'enthusiasm' for the Vedanta led him to the obstinate rejection of the doctrine of *anatta* in particular and Buddhism in general. Any careful reader of Guénon's work will readily admit that he is never sentimentally inclined to this or that traditional doctrine as asserted by Pallis, what to speak of the Vedanta. On the contrary, Guénon's message is one of overcoming our petty enthusiasm and sentiments which has really been a difficult task for men like Pallis. Strangely enough, Pallis accuses Guénon of harbouring an obstinate attitude to Buddhism whereas Martin Lings testifies that he was "very open to being persuaded." It is still even stranger that Guénon despite his notorious obstinacy yielded to the arguments of Pallis and others in support of Buddhism not being a heresy. Lings have yet another strange thing to say in this regard. In 1946, he and Pallis made Guénon realize his mistakes on Buddhism and as a result a series of necessary corrections followed. But this is not all; to our surprise we did not find even a trace of anything negative against Buddhism in the 1945th edition of Guénon's first work, which was translated by none other than Pallis into English. In the light of this evidence how could it be possible for Lings to claim that before 1946 Guénon "wrote against Buddhism as though it was not one of the great religions of the world?"

It seemed hard for Pallis to believe that Buddhism could be less profound than Hinduism as judged by Guénon, because he had already chosen Buddhism for himself. The idea of Buddhism's inferiority would have hurt his ego which led him to defend it with a militant zeal. He thought that, as an insider he was, he was more competent than Guénon on the question of Buddhism whence his enthusiastic and sentimental endeavors to correct Guénon not unlike those who showed the same zeal in respect of Christianity. It may be of interest to note that they took refuge in a saying of Aristotle which says, "Plato is dear to us but truth is more dearer" as if there is necessarily a duality between 'Plato' and 'truth', insofar as the former is a vehicle of the latter. It is no less ironical that the men who were invoking the saying of Aristotle for their ulterior motives preferred their own profane choices over truth. In other words, 'Plato' was more dear to them than 'truth' in so far as they were unable to conquer their mundane individuality.

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If, however, Pallis and others disagreed with Guénon on certain things it was not because of their great competence and formidable erudition, rather they failed to rid themselves of their own peculiar sentimental make-ups and idiosyncrasies which acted as a serious obstacle in developing any true understanding of metaphysics.

With the change in the cosmic environment by virtue of qualitative changes in time and space one witnesses, observes Pallis, that modestly gifted people are becoming familiar with those truths which have been hitherto possessed by the Guénonian elite, that is, they are no longer a secret and this state of affairs makes the Guénonian thesis of exo-esoteric cleavage (Pallis' illusion) doubtful as the relationship between the two has changed considerably in keeping with the cyclic changes. Guénon did not make clear as to where the boundary between exoteric and esoteric is to be drawn and his mistake lies in the fact that he did not leave enough room "for overlap and interpenetration in either direction."

We would say that overlapping and interpenetration occurs when the two things are of the same order. How is it possible, strictly speaking, when the 'conception' and 'expression' or 'spirit' and 'letter' do not pertain to the same domain? It is true that "whatever is covered up will be uncovered" as the Bible would have it, but what to speak of those for whom the truth still remains veiled or inexistent although it has been unveiled. Unfortunately, this last possibility we experience more frequently in this hour of crisis. Moreover, the secrecy of truth is such that it always remains secret even if it is laid bare in broad daylight. "The Absolute (*haq*) is so nakedly apparent that It cannot be seen," sings a Persian Sufi. The readers of Guénon can almost be found in every corner of the world but mere readership does not necessarily guarantee full immunity from the ill comprehensions that may occur due to the *tamasic* quality of a soul.

Pallis argues that the esoteric knowledge cannot be the monopoly of the chosen few because it is unlimited in itself, which it surely is, and consequently remains open to all. We would say in reply that the limitlessness of esoteric knowledge does not, however, necessitate its accessibility nay comprehensibility, at least in our times, to all and sundry. Moreover, why are all the religions or multiple sects within a single religion are fighting with one another so zealously and vehemently when the esoteric knowledge is coming or has come, as asserted by Pallis, within the reach of all?

So, Pallis seems to cherish grave illusions when he observes: "Truths which not so long ago were extrinsically inexpressible and called for prudence on the part of the few who were capable of facing them have all of a sudden become accessible and even necessary to every man of reasonably sound mind; he neither has to be an initiate nor a genius in order to grasp them, at least in an elementary sense." We wonder if Pallis is able to grasp those very truths, "at least in an elementary sense" which he so enthusiastically wants to put at everybody's disposal thanks to the changing times.

Another point raised by Pallis is that of Guénon's Christian background. He says that Guénon owing to his Christian background had "to emphasize strongly this idea of exo-esoteric cleavage as being something which many would find difficult to grasp." One can see quite clearly that the expression "exo-esoteric cleavage" connotes division and split whereas Guénon emphasized the distinction between the two terms in the sense of *bhedabheda* instead of cleavage or division. It is obvious that the point raised by Pallis about Guénon's Christian background is nonsense pure and simple - The Spirit blows where It wishes. Guénon viewed the two terms, says Pallis, as watertight compartments

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and hastens to add that “such is not the case.” In order to meet this objection we have to ensure first whether Guénon really saw the two distinctive terms as watertight compartments so that the one is absolutely independent of the other. Let us hasten to add that “such is not the case” as we have already shown above briefly and Guénon was perfectly right when he thought that the relationship between the two is “something which many (including Pallis) would find difficult to grasp!” The truth of the matter is that Guénon regards esotericism and exotericism as “two aspects of a single doctrine” or “two different levels of teaching”. On the same question Pallis' doubts were dispelled by a Japanese Zen lecturer when he was responding to his question in respect of relation between ‘own power’ (jiriki) and ‘other power’ (tariki). The Lecturer answered: “They are two sides of the same coin. This is self-evident. Moreover, is not Zen a non-dualistic doctrine?” We can understand how easily Pallis forgot the lesson taught by the Zen lecturer because the same considerations are applicable to the relation between esotericism and exotericism. It is a pity that Pallis' reading of Guénon's work is so shallow and faulty. One needs to be cautious while reading his work as well as his translations of Guénon's work. The ugly incomprehension on the part of Pallis accounts for Guénon's reservations about Buddhist people and things.

Elsewhere, Pallis was talking about the questions which are posed wrongly, that is, which do not have a real existence but are invented by the confused minds. Now this rule is perfectly valid which he has surely learnt from Guénon but sadly Pallis too cannot help posing silly, non-sensical and non-existent questions as we have already shown above.

In the same work, Pallis says that our knowledge of other religions has increased considerably due to 150 years of scholarship and Guénon profitably made use of this opportunity presenting to us the millennial truths in Christian and western terms, while of course not asking us to copy the eastern wisdom. Can the availability of 150 years of scholarship on which Guénon was to base his work, be regarded as an act of Providence otherwise it would not have been possible for him to accomplish the arduous task of restating the perennial truths? To this question we would tend to reply in the affirmative because the Heaven does not work independently of the earthly realities rather It seeks to mould them for Its own exalted purposes.