

The Return of the Perennial Philosophy. The Supreme Vision of Western Esotericism

By John Holman.

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Review by Roland Benedikter

This book tries to provide a short integrative picture of the Western esoteric worldview, seen as the historical basis of contemporary “experiential” spirituality. Holman’s main hypothesis is that in the present epoch of a broad renaissance of traditional religion it is increasingly becoming necessary to know the main themes and features of the “empirical spirituality” of the West that have long been hidden in the background of its public sphere. “Empirical spirituality” is conceived as being opposed to mere “faith” and dedicated instead to “spiritual research” and “exploration” in “first person.” To identify what the common ground (or the “supreme vision”) of the very different Western esoteric streams has been in the last seven centuries shall enable the reader to help prepare the present culture of secular rationality for the “return of the perennial philosophy,” and thus for a more balanced societal paradigm. “Perennial philosophy” is outlined as an experimental proceeding of opening up new empirical knowledge between realism and transcendentalism. According to Holman, this proceeding has always been equipped with certain methodological tools common to more or less all Western esoteric traditions in order to create experiential alternatives to collectivistic, myth-oriented religion.

The book consists of an introduction and three main parts divided in 13 chapters. The *Introduction* gives a brief overview of the studies carried out so far about the field mainly by means of a critical history of ideas, and depicts the “ethnomethodological” approach chosen by the author. This approach consists in studying the esoteric traditions “from within,” i.e. in a consciously participatory and identificatory way, or as the author puts it, “as practitioner.” Building on these methodological presuppositions, *part one* starts with an overview of the main currents of Western Gnosticism, among others Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Alchemy, and Kabbalism. Most importantly, it tries to differentiate between traditionalism and progressivism within the historical esoteric efforts in Western culture. The focus of Holman’s historical overview is hereby on Theosophy, which he interprets as being a kind of “historical knot” within the development of an “empirical spirituality” (chapters 1-4). The *second part* of the book tries to identify the “philosophical and spiritual center” of Western esotericism as an initiation process common, in diverse forms, to all its sub-streams and variants. This (according to Holman mainly fivefold) initiation process is exemplified in five rather descriptive chapters (chapters 5-9). Finally, the *third part* discusses the rise of a “spiritual psychology” in the 20th and 21st centuries, mainly through the approaches of Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli and Ken Wilber. The author purports that this “spiritual psychology” seems to be nothing else than a derivate (as well as the necessary next historical step) of the history of Western esotericism. Holman tries to depict this “new discipline” as the main contemporary form of Western spirituality, as well as a decisive



“psycho-philosophical” contribution to the “change of worldviews” urgently needed by a world in crisis (chapters 10-13). In the future such a “spiritual psychology” has to be included in the general societal self-concept of a modernity that goes beyond the fallacies of “postmodernity” and “progressivism,” but also beyond those of “premodernity” and “traditionalism.”

Holman’s book has its indisputable merits. The structure of his book is clear and precise, and the author proceeds with great security from one step to the next. No previous knowledge is needed for the reader to follow his arguments. The discourse Holman chooses is inspiring to get a first impression of the field, especially for beginners, who are endeavouring in their first contact with the topic. The book invites the reader to discover a whole new “intellectual continent,” and to start more in-depth studies afterwards.

At the same time, like most similar approaches, and like it is maybe unavoidably inbuilt in an endeavour like the one dared by the author, the book presents several problems. These problems can be classified as implicit and explicit ones. Let me shortly come to the *implicit* ones first.

1. The book seems to be ridden by an “unconscious inner dispute” about its center, and this dispute is constituted as a kind of paradox. On the one hand, the book is visibly concentrated on recent (post-New Age) Anglo-American concepts and developments in the (self-)interpretation of esotericism. Only very seldom does it include the Continental European traditions. For example, Freemasonry, as the most important current which helped to give birth to the French Revolution as well as to the American constitution, is hardly mentioned at all, and certainly not appropriately included. Similarly, Anthroposophy is in essence subsumed under Theosophy, which means to oversimplify things. On the other hand, the book constantly mixes Western and Eastern approaches, without discerning them appropriately, and then simply classifies them as “Western.” Even if the book is explicitly entitled “The supreme vision of Western esotericism,” it claims, for instance, that Ken Wilber’s theory of the subtle states of awareness is a current central cornerstone of it. But most of the observers would rather state that in reality most of Wilber’s findings, methodologies and especially of his guiding terminologies have been drawn – even if rather eclectically – almost exclusively from the Eastern traditions. Most of Wilber’s writings are of clear Eastern inspiration and terminology, and do not present sustainable traces of the main currents of Western spirituality, especially not of Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy or Anthroposophy, of which Wilber seems to have only little knowledge (which may be one reason why he has so far not found a durable access to the mainstream of academic research and teaching in European-Western culture). Cf. his exemplary negative judgement on Rudolf Steiner just in a brief footnote (sic!) in “Sex, Ecology, Spirituality” (1995).

2. A second problem is that the author is not “scientific” in his approach, but “identificative.” The approach chosen by Holman is in principle logically understandable and maybe even methodologically needed; but it is carried out in an at least partially questionable way. The cadence of the work is one of a private expert speaking as part of a community, not as an academically embedded scholar dedicated to a sound “subjective-objective” exploration. Holman seems not to ponder things from the standpoint of the necessary “epochè,” but often falls into a style dangerously close to propaganda. That is mirrored by his sometimes vague, and in general rather literary than scientific use of terms (for example, “the virus of postmodernity,” “quantum leap ... of esotericism” etc.). Holman is repeatedly even polemic against academic scholarship,

and this will most probably not be helpful for the establishment of spirituality as an academically accepted (and funded) topic.

3. Related to that, the author rarely addresses his main guiding concepts – such as “evolution of consciousness” – critically (and thus, as the standards of current academic scrutiny would demand, dialectically). By not doing this and rather departing from an “identity position” of concepts, Holman tends to give his own interpretation of concepts as *the meaning* of them. This may be inspiring for the beginner, but it is not accurate. This fallacy is especially noticeable in part two of the book which tries to address the alleged “four main Enlightenment” of the “*philosophia perennis*,” which are depicted as being common to all sub-currents of Western Esotericism. But this basic assumption could be seriously challenged by a deeper look into the history of ideas and esoteric practices. Most probably, some of Holman’s descriptions in this regard would not be unquestionably endorsed by any other movement within Western Esotericism except by his own.

4. These implicit problems now culminate in one aspect that I personally regard as crucial to be addressed in further similar attempts. It is the fact that there is no such thing as an “identity in itself” of no philosophical or esoteric approach in history, be it as “perennial” as imaginable. From the standpoint of the contemporary history of ideas, more emphasis must be put on the fact that within every current of thought, be it considered at the typological macro-level or at its factual reality-level, there is, has been and will most probably always be – with no exception – a constitutive dialectics between at least two sub-streams in its inside, which battle each other for the overall direction of the thought and its methodology. That is valid also for “integral” thought and practice. There is no “integral theory” as such, but there are many claims for it, which must be understood out of their contextual relationship with various constituents. This seems to be a decisive aspect to me, especially if seen from a contemporary perspective like the one voluntarily chosen by Holman. It is crucial for the sheer quality of the debate both in a public and “internal” perspective. I think there is a self-identification of Holman’s perspective as *the* perennial philosophy inbuilt in his basic aspiration, as well as implicit in the basic attitudes of most of his main doyens, including John Huston, which hinders their “philosophies” to become an accepted subject of discussion. And it is this attitude that most likely creates part of the existing problems for the development of a truly contemporary “*philosophia perennis*,” because it is due to this attitude that many of the streams and currents that identify themselves as being “integrative” or “perennial” battle each other, instead of seeking exchange, and integration among them.

5. That is, from my viewpoint, one reason why in its present form the book of Holman can hardly give a sustainable impulse to the discussion neither about nor within the field, not even at the present moment when the “global renaissance of religion” would indeed provide a valuable (counter-)framework for a “return of the *philosophia perennis*.” Holman’s book does not differentiate in its attempt to unify. To insinuate, for example, that Wilber and Tarnas are saying mainly the same things, will hardly be confirmed by neither of these authors. If the inner differences and conflicts within the currents that would call themselves today being part of the “*philosophia perennis*” are not addressed, no “unifying picture” will be accepted by a satisfying number of potential participants.

Among the *explicit* problems, I would like to mention only two:

1. The book presents no satisfying differentiation between experiential, religious and “rationally enlightened” sub-currents in the field.

2. The organization of the book is slightly unbalanced. Out of 164 pages of text, 32 are dedicated to footnotes, which means roughly a fifth of the book. The Index seems to be similarly over-detailed if compared to the grade of detail and to the overall length of the main text. It causes an impression of over-condensation of the text, and thus of over-simplification.

Holman’s book seems to be written in a rather “New Age” mood and style. If compared to other similar, but much more elaborated and “deep” titles, such as Wouter J. Haanegraaff’s *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (State University of New York, SUNY Series on Western Esoteric Traditions, 1998), which Holman himself quotes in the methodological part of his introduction, or to Helmut Reinalter’s *Die Freimaurer* (Beck Verlag, Munich 2001), Holman’s book does not seem to be sufficiently competitive. This is because it is not balanced, “distanced” and scientific enough. Holman’s book tends to oversimplify things, and it seems not to be able to satisfactorily represent the variety and complexity of the field addressed. Instead, it often falls into identifications with particular interpretations. That would in principle not be a problem, because it is probably inherent in the very difficult (if not impossible) attempt to give a short and introductive “unifying picture” of Western “Empirical” Spirituality as such. But it becomes a problem when Holman tries to sell his particular interpretations as *the philosophia perennis*.

To sum up, Holman’s book is an interesting, but incomplete contribution. It is unable to sketch a sustainable outline of how to mutually include Rationality and Spirituality for the years to come. On the one hand, Holman’s discussion about the future relationship between “Postmodernity” and “Spirituality” (chapter 10) presents some potentially fruitful elements. On the other hand, Holman’s book is no substitute for more scientifically sound and in-depth investigations that still have to be written. It cannot be considered as representative for the field, and it is not of an appropriate erudition to claim to be a satisfactory introduction to it as a whole neither. It is, at its best, a good representation of a partial (self-)interpretative approach *within* the very differentiated and diversified streams of the *philosophia perennis*.

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